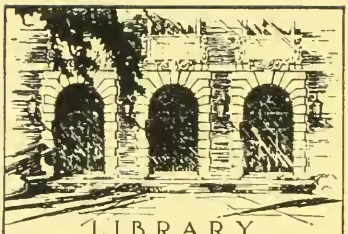
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THE MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

CHAPTER I.

THE BROTHERS.

It was in the middle of the year 1824, that two brothers were entered as graduates at one of the Colleges of Oxford University. Their name was Vivian: they belonged to the noble family of Viviandale; but as their father was a junior scion thereof, his pecuniary means were somewhat limited. The Hon. Mr. Vivian, who was a widower, had but these two sons; and he hoped by giving them a

collegiate education, to fit them for such professions as they might respectively be led by taste or opportunity to adopt, and in which the family interest was likely to push them on. They were two handsome youths,—reflecting in their own persons the masculine beauty of a fine and haughty race,—with dispositions naturally good, but nevertheless already somewhat warped by a fond father's too great indulgence, as well as by the influences of that sphere of life in which they were born, and in the midst of which they had been caressed, petted, and flattered.

At the time when they entered Oxford University, Hugh, the elder, was in the opening of his twenty-first year—Bertram, the younger, a little past eighteen. They were of equal stature: but Hugh was more strongly and stoutly built than his brother,—not merely because his additional two years had given to his form more manly developments, but because the younger was naturally of a more slender and more gracefully symmetrical figure. Though it was impossible not to be struck by the haughtily handsome countenance of the elder, it was equally impossible to avoid drawing a comparison in favour of the more delicately chiselled Grecian profile of the latter. The expression of Hugh's features was entirely of the sense: that of Bertram's of the sentiment. While the former indicated a love of pleasure, strong passions, and a disposition which was sensuous as well as proud, —that of the latter denoted a rare intelligence blended with its pride; and the classic curl of the short upper lip declared an instinctive disdain of falsehood. Hugh's forehead was large, prominent, and massive—that of Bertram high and arched: the former pale from a too early acquaintance with dissipation—the latter pale likewise, but as if Genius itself had stamped that pallor there. Thus the brow of the elder brother seemed one on which passion and pleasure might in after years trace their lines; while that of the younger brother had all the immortality of the intellect predicted in its marble dream. The eyes of both were dark,—those of the elder flashing with all worldly feelings, —those of the younger with the lightnings of the mind. Hugh's hair was black, strong even to coarseness, and without a gloss: that of Bertram was of raven richness, shining with its own natural velvety brightness, and clustering in excessive luxuriance over the small, delicate, well-folded ears, and by the sides of the alabaster temples. Altogether, the elder brother was one whose fine appearance could not fail to command admiration, but nothing else: while that of the younger brother inspired the same feeling, but blended with interest, and almost love.

On entering upon their college life, Hugh soon formed acquaintances of dispositions congenial with his own, and gave himself up to manly sports by day and dissipated pleasures by night. Hunting, racing, boating, fishing, and cock-fighting, constituted the former: revelling, cards, and visits to forbidden haunts of pleasurable vice, composed the latter. On the other hand, Bertram—led by taste as well as by a sense of duty—applied himself to his studies: but he could not altogether escape the influences of an elder brother's example. In aristocratic families, where the casualties of nature may raise elder brothers to the possession of hereditary titles and estates, younger brothers are apt to look up to them with perhaps too much deference, from a sense that they may in process of time be placed in the position of destiny's arbiters in respect to the worldly career of those whom the laws of primogeniture and entail thus throw in dependence upon them. Moreover, there is often, even in the breasts of the best-disposed youths, a spirited and prideful disinclination to be taunted with being "bookworms" and "saints," when elder brothers invite them to partake in pleasures and amusements: and thus is it that well-principled lads are frequently led, by a sense of false shame, to quit pursuits in reality most congenial to their tastes, and deviate into others but little consonant with their inclinations. To all these varied but potent influences was Bertram Vivian subjected; and when once the ice was broken,—when once, in other words, he had left his studies to accompany his brother and that brother's boon companions amidst scenes of pleasure—the compunctious feelings attendant thereon gradually wore off. Not however that Bertram became inveterately dissipated, or that he abandoned himself so completely to pleasure, as did Hugh: but still he was not so steady as he ought to have been. The consequences were, that at the end of the first year of the two young men's collegiate experience, they found that they had far outstripped their pecuniary means, and that they had contracted debts which they dared not mention to their father, and which nevertheless without his succour they had not the remotest chance of liquidating.

The University tradesmen were not however clamorous. It was sufficient for them to know that the Vivians belonged to a family in which there were lofty titles that bespoke the accompaniment of great wealth; and they considered themselves tolerably safe in being sooner or later paid by some member of this aristocratic family. Hugh pursued his career of extravagance as if he were actual heir to the Marquisate of Viviandale from which the family lustre was derived,—between which and himself there were nevertheless great gulfs fixed: while Bertram, though without the moral courage to stop short in the pathway of ruin, was at times distracted by the sense of those difficulties that were gradually enmeshing him in a web which he feared to be inextricable. He had not, we say, the moral courage to check himself: that feeling of false shame, and that idea of more or less dependence on his brother, to which we have already alluded, prevented him from asserting the natural rectitude of his position and courageously obeying its impulses in spite of all other considerations. But fortunately for him, something occurred which turned all his thoughts and all his feelings into a completely new channel.

The brothers had been about a year at the University—they were now respectively somewhat past twenty-one and nineteen—when Bertram accidentally formed the acquaintance of a half-pay Captain in the Army and his daughter. The gentleman, whose name was Lacey, was stricken in years: he had married late in life—one child was the issue of this alliance—but the event which rendered him a father, made him also a widower. His means were limited: but he had done his best to rear his darling Eliza in a becoming manner. He had stinted himself to give her a good educa-

tion; and as she grew up in loveliness and in virtue, she rewarded him for his care with the most devoted affection. Sensible of the numerous sacrifices which her father had made on her account, she felt that no degree of tenderness could be too great wherewith to recompense such a parent. His will, therefore, was her law; and if he had demanded any sacrifice at her hands, even that of her life, she would have made it resignedly——nay, more—cheerfully.

And exquisitely beautiful was Eliza Lacey. A year younger than Bertram Vivian,—that is to say, with eighteen summers upon her head at the time their acquaintance was formed,—youth and health lent all their charms to her face and figure. A cloud of raven tresses fell around her oval countenance: her complexion was matchless in its transparent purity,—pale on the lofty expansive brow—dazzlingly fair on the softly rounded shoulders, the arching neck, and the Hebe-modelled bust—but with the rich carnation tint upon the cheeks, and with a still more vivid and a riper crimson on the lips. The delicately pencilled raven brows arched nobly above eyes that were large and dark, and which though so bright, had an ineffable sweetness of expression. Her features were outlined with a perfect regularity; and her teeth were as white as pearls. A little above the medium stature of woman, her figure, just in all its proportions, had a certain graceful and flowing roundness in the contours and in the limbs, which added to its marvellous symmetry. All her movements, even to the slightest gesture, were characterized by an unstudied elegance; and thus, in every respect, was she the rarest model of feminine beauty. Her disposition was amiable and good—naturally trustful and confiding: incapable of guile herself, she suspected it not in others. Scandal and malice, jealousy and envy, were known to her only by name,—beyond which she had no experience of them. Her manners and her conversation were modelled by her character — frank, artless, and fascinating. Yet though so utterly unacquainted with the darker sides of humanity and the treacheries of the world, she was not on this account to be regarded as an easy victim for seductive perfidy: her very innocence was in itself a defence. The intuitive sense of her sex's dignity and of virginal propriety, would in a moment have led her to resent the slightest word that shocked, or the first look that threatened her with insult.

Such was Eliza Lacey. She dwelt with her father in a small but comfortable house on the outskirt of the University City,—their only attendant being an elderly female who was in Captain Lacey's service at the time of his marriage, and who had therefore known his charming and interesting daughter from the moment of her birth. Captain Lacey, on leaving the Army and settling down into married life, had fixed his abode at Oxford,—not exactly through choice, but from the fact that the death of a relative had bequeathed him a small property consisting of three houses. In one of these he lived: the other two were let—and the moderate rentals derived therefrom, added to his own half-pay, constituted his entire income. This was small enough: but still, by dint of the strictest frugality, the little family was enabled to maintain a respectable appearance and avoid debt. The possession of the houses likewise relieved Captain Lacey's mind from the bitter anxiety which he would otherwise have felt at the thought of death snatching him away from the world ere his daughter should be comfortably settled in it: for though his half-pay would die with him, yet the rents of the little property would produce a sufficiency for the subsistence of her who would be left behind him. Thus, though well aware that the City of Oxford was by no means the most suitable place for a beautiful girl, as Eliza was, to reside in,—Captain Lacey was in a certain measure chained to the spot; and moreover, he trusted to his daughter's admirable principles as a sufficient safeguard against whatsoever temptation might be thrown in her way. He had however been careful in avoiding the acquaintance of any of the young collegians; and though several attempts were made on their part to obtain an introduction to Captain Lacey and his daughter, they had all proved ineffectual.

It is needless to particularize the details of the accident which threw Bertram Vivian in their way. Suffice it to say that on one occasion he was fortunate enough in being close at hand when a half-tipsy undergraduate, meeting the young lady in the street, offered her an insult: and he struck the fellow to the ground. To escort Miss Lacey to her home, became a courteous necessity on his part, and which she could not without rudeness decline: to be invited to walk in and receive the thanks of her father, was an equally natural sequence. During this brief interview, Captain Lacey was so favourably impressed with his daughter's deliverer, that when the latter solicited permission to call and pay his respects again, utter churlishness could have alone refused it. He did call; and he became enamoured of Eliza Lacey. The tone of his conversation, his agreeable manners, the delicacy of his conduct, and the unstudied evidences of a fine intellect which developed themselves,—all contributed to confirm Captain Lacey's favourable opinion on the one hand, and to make their impression upon Eliza's heart on the other. The Captain, without setting himself studiously and deliberately to work to inquire into the young man's prospects, thought it, when he happened to learn that Bertram belonged to a noble family, quite sufficient to prove that these prospects must be good; and though hitherto he had entertained a very indifferent opinion—bordering indeed almost upon aversion—for the Oxford Collegians, he was now inclined to fancy that Bertram Vivian constituted at least *one* very favourable exception.

Bertram called as often as he dared, consistently with delicacy, when this acquaintance first commenced: his visits however soon became more frequent; and from the very fact that he found pleasure in taking a quiet cup of tea and passing his evenings in that humble parlour, the Captain argued everything in favour of the young man's steadiness. Thus was it that as weeks grew into months, and Bertram's attentions became more and more marked towards Eliza, the father inwardly rejoiced on beholding the evidences of a mutual attachment on the part of the young couple: for he felt that his gray hairs would go down with additional resignation, and even with contentment, to the grave, if previous to his death he had the happiness of seeing his beloved daugh-

ter comfortably settled in life. If the Captain had been wise—or in other words, more cunningly and shrewdly worldly-minded—he would have taken the trouble to inquire into the young man's prospects,—when he would have found that though belonging to the Viviandale family, yet as the younger son of a younger branch, Bertram had nothing but that family's interest to push him on in the world. The retired old officer was however naturally indolent—too apt to take his own views of things as positively acquired facts—and withal exceedingly self-willed: so that whatever he got into his head, he regarded as something quite as positive, real, and actual, as if it had received ten thousand unmistakable corroborations.

Months passed on; and Bertram Vivian became steadiness itself. Scrupulously keeping secret his acquaintance with the Lacey family, he withdrew himself from the society of Hugh and his companions,—love rendering him utterly indifferent to the taunts which a false shame would not at one time have suffered him to endure. His brother fancied that he was seized with a studying-fit; and being at length tired of endeavouring to draw the "bookworm," as he called him, from his pursuits, he vented his annoyance in such terms as "milksop" and "saint," and ultimately left Bertram altogether to his own courses. Thus, all the time that the younger brother could spare from his studies—and some too which he pilfered therefrom—he passed at Captain Lacey's house.

It was a dream of bliss in which the two lovers were plunged. Months and months had elapsed since their acquaintance first commenced; and though their lips had breathed no avowal of affection, yet their looks had mutually told the tale. They never walked out together: because Bertram did not choose to stand the chance of encountering, when in the companionship of Eliza, any of his College friends—least of all his brother. He was fearful of being dragged into the necessity of introducing them: and from such an idea he recoiled loathingly. It was sufficient happiness for him to sit by the charming girl's side in the comfortable little parlour, conversing with her—reading to her—looking over books with her—gazing upon her while she worked—and exchanging tender glances. Even the presence of her father was not felt as a restraint: for the old gentleman, when not dozing in his arm-chair, treated him with as much kindness as if he were a son—considered him as good as formally engaged to his daughter—and smiled upon them both. But if the father took no pains to make direct inquiries into the young man's prospects, the artless and unsophisticated Eliza, it may be easily supposed, made none at all. She just knew that he was connected with the Viviandale family—and no more. As for there being anything selfish in her love, the Alpine snows were not purer. It was a youthful heart's first virgin affection that was given to Bertram Vivian:—on his side it was a young man's first love, profound—glowing—impassioned—but all a dream, without the soberness of waking reflections. He paused not to ask himself whether this vision of bliss could ever be realized—whether it were possible that he should ever lead Eliza Lacey to the altar. The present was so full of rapturous enjoyment, that he looked not beyond it. Youthful love is in itself faith and hope: it is the religion of the heart, as the worship of God is the religion of the soul. It has a sort of tacit reliance upon the future, without studying the grounds on which such reliance is based: it believes in paradise, as the worshipper of the Almighty believes in paradise also—without knowing when or how the period of enjoyment is to be brought about.

Thus a year passed away from the date of Bertram's acquaintance with the Laceys,—when, in the middle of 1826, he was suddenly startled from his dream of bliss. A death in the family, by removing the old Marquis, called another to assume the coronet; and the two young men were summoned peremptorily from Oxford to attend the funeral of the deceased peer. The same letter gave them to understand that the circumstance of their heavy debts had come to their father's knowledge—that they must be careful to bring with them lists of their liabilities, with a view to their prompt and equitable settlement—and that they were to give notice to their tutors that they would return to Oxford no more. If it were a merely temporary separation from Eliza, Bertram could have borne it—as indeed he had borne, during the vacation, a brief interruption to their constant companionship. But now that he was given to understand that his father's circumstances, being somewhat improved by the death in the family, enabled him at once to provide for his two sons, and that therefore their collegiate career was at an end, the young man's grief knew no bounds.

In a state bordering upon frenzy, he flew to Captain Lacey's house, and sought an interview with Eliza. Her father was out for his usual walk at the time: and some household duties had kept the young maiden at home. The unexpected visit from her lover at an unusual hour, would have been fraught with ineffable pleasure, were it not for the distressing intelligence he had to communicate. They threw themselves into each other's arms—they embraced tenderly: it was the first time that ever their lips had met in kisses—the first time that ever Eliza's heart beat against Bertram's own! They were both now awakened, as if by a thunderclap, from their dream of bliss; and for the first half-hour of this parting interview, their affliction bordered upon despair. But did we not ere now say that love itself is faith and hope?—and it is not in the nature of youthful souls to abandon themselves altogether to utter desperation. Neither was it in this case. By degrees they grew calmer; and Bertram whispered vows, and protestations, and hopes in the ear of his beloved.

"My father," he said, "purposes at once to embark me in some career in which I may doubtless acquire fortune and eminence. The family to which I belong, is rich and powerful; and with all the advantages of such interest, my struggle against the world can neither be a painful nor a long one. Besides—sweetest, dearest girl—your image will serve as my guiding-star—the beacon of hope—the emblem of that reward which shall crown all my arduous toils! A few years—perhaps only two or three may be necessary—will soon pass: we are both so young, dearest Eliza!—we shall then be young still!—and when we meet again to part no more—Oh, what happiness will await us! And then too, whatever may be the

career for which my father destines me, I may from time to time be enabled to hasten thither, on the wings of love, to see you. We can write to each other; and in all these prospects—in all these circumstances—there are many sources of consolation!"

The head of the weeping girl—that beauteous head, drooping like a tulip on its slender stalk—sank on her lover's shoulder; and she murmured expressions of unchanging love, as well as of gratitude for the solace he proffered her.

"You are mine, adored Eliza!" he said: "you are mine—and here in the face of heaven, do I pledge myself wholly and solely unto you! Take this ring, my well-beloved: it has the initial of my Christian name graven on the stone. Keep it, Eliza, as an earnest of those vows which I so solemnly, sacredly plight you now."

Almost blinded by her tears, the lovely being placed the ring in her bosom; and drawing off one from her own fair finger, she murmured in accents that were broken and scarcely audible, yet filled with the soft plaintive harmony of her dulcet voice,—"And you, dearest Bertram, take this! It bears also the initial of my name: I will not tell you that I shall remain constant: my own heart gives me that assurance,—and you, who can read the secrets of that heart, know that it is entirely and inseparably thine!"

Bertram took the ring—pressed it to his lips—and placed it upon his finger. Then the moment for parting came. Oh! who can depict the anguish — the excruciation of feeling — which marked that moment? The calmness which had succeeded the first ebullition of despair, and which in itself was only comparative, vanished altogether. Bertrand strained his adored Eliza in convulsive violence to his breast: they both felt as if the tenderest chords of their hearts were being rudely torn asunder. They separated in a state bordering upon frenzy: Bertram rushed from the house—while the young maiden, sinking upon a seat, felt as if she and happiness had shaken hands for ever.

Captain Lacey returned home about a quarter of an hour afterwards, and when the agonizing intentness of Eliza's affliction had somewhat passed away—or at least was mitigated by the hopes which she busied herself to conjure up. For, Oh! it was so necessary for that young heart to sustain itself with hope! The Captain was thunderstruck when his daughter informed him of what had occurred. He—good, credulous, but self-willed man—had arranged everything so comfortably in his own mind. Bertrand would no doubt stay another year longer at the University—he would then be well provided for by his family—and his marriage with Eliza would at once take place as a matter of course. Such was the Captain's foreshadowing: but the dream was suddenly dispelled —and with the destruction of his delusions, came worldly-minded reflections, thickly pouring in. His eyes were now opened to the fatal error he had committed: he ought to have inquired at the outset whether in due time Bertram Vivian would be in a position to settle in marriage. He now comprehended that so far from anything of the sort, the young man had to enter on the career of life, and, with certain chances given him, carve them out into substantial shape as best he could. The Captain was by no means such an idiot as not to bethink himself that separation and altered circumstances make a wonderful change in the youthful heart; and firmly convinced as he had previously been that all would go on smoothly in love's career, to be crowned with the marriage of the young couple in the end,—so settled did his conviction now become that the whole thing was as good as broken off between them. He inwardly cursed himself for his folly: but out of regard for his daughter, he did not at once suffer her to perceive how altered his views were in respect to the hope that he should ever see her the bride of Bertram Vivian.

A few days elapsed—at the expiration of which interval, Eliza received a letter, dated from Oaklands, the seat of the head of the family to which her lover belonged, and which was situated in Hampshire—far away from the city of Oxford. There it was that the old Marquis had died, and his successor had taken possession of the hereditary honours and estates: there it was, too, that all the members of the family were now assembled, to attend the grand funeral which was to consign the deceased peer to his last resting-place. The letter was such a passion-breathing epistle as an enthusiastic lover might be expected to write, and as an adoring maiden might expect to receive. It told her that Bertram's father, now Lord Vivian, had not as yet spoken to either of his sons in respect to his intentions concerning them; but that such communication was reserved until after the funeral,—when Bertram would write again to his beloved.

And in a few more days another letter came. But if it were written almost in despair,—so it likewise nearly filled with despair the heart of the affectionate maiden. Bertram was at once going abroad as a paid Attaché to the English Embassy in the United States; and seas would therefore soon roll between himself and his beloved. So hurried were the preliminaries for his departure, and so closely was he watched by his sire, that he had no opportunity of obeying the dictates of his heart, and flying to Oxford to bid Eliza a last farewell. But he renewed all his pledges of devoted affection—reminded her of the exchange of rings—and conjured her to sustain her spirits for his sake.

Captain Lacey, to whom these letters were shown by his daughter—who never in her life kept anything secret from her father—was more than ever convinced of the infatuated madness of his own conduct in suffering the young couple to linger on in their dream of bliss while himself hoped that it would be ultimately realized. He saw that his daughter's happiness was altogether at stake; and painful though it were for him to take such a step, it was nevertheless his duty to make her aware of his sentiments. Better for her now to envisage at once the uncertainty of her heart's hope ever being fulfilled, than for her to continue cherishing that hope with the prospect of having it blighted in the end! He therefore gently and gradually, and with ill-subdued emotions, represented to her that Bertram Vivian had evidently to commence the upward toil of life—that years might elapse ere he would be sufficiently independent to come and claim an almost portionless young lady as his bride,—that in the meanwhile

the ardour of his passion might cool—new faces might inspire new sentiments—and even if another affection might not beguile him from his first love, prudential reasons might induce him to form some brilliant matrimonial alliance. Eliza listened with mingled grief and astonishment to her father's observations; and enthusiastically did she express her conviction—uttered however amidst torrents of tears—that Bertram would remain faithful. Captain Lacey had nerved his fortitude to the accomplishment of a certain duty; and he was resolved not to do it by halves. He therefore went on to say that Eliza, if she were prudent, would do well to prepare herself for any eventual disappointment—and that painful though it were for him to issue a harsh injunction, he felt the absolute necessity of forbidding all correspondence between herself and Bertram,—adding that he himself would write the young gentleman a letter to explain his views on the subject.

He did write such a letter. It was kindly and considerately worded,—recommending Mr. Bertram Vivian to abstain, for at least a couple of years, from any correspondence with his daughter —suggesting that this interval would fully test the state of his feelings with regard to her—and promising that if at the end of the period he should still experience the same attachment, he (Captain Lacey) would be only too delighted and proud to permit Eliza to renew her engagement with the Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian.

The young lady's good sense showed her that her father was acting with a due regard to her welfare; and moreover, it was her habit to submit implicitly to his will. She had the fullest confidence in Bertram: she had equal confidence in the strength of her own love. Two years—Oh! what was this interval as a test for that love which she felt assured would outlive centuries, if human existence itself ranged over ages! The very necessity of clinging to hope made her picture to herself this interval as soon passing away; and *then* there need be no farther barrier to her happiness! The engagement would be renewed—or rather re-acknowledged by her parent; and if years should still elapse ere she became Bertram's bride, she could wait, happy and contented in the consciousness of possessing his love.

The letter was despatched at once to Bertram Vivian: it reached him on the eve of his departure for the United States—and his reply came by return of post. He bowed to Captain Lacey's decision,—not but that it pained him sorely: yet he bowed, so that this very submission might be taken as a proof of his love, shown to the daughter through the deferential respect paid to the father. But he besought Captain Lacey to assure Eliza of his undying constancy—of his imperishable devotion!

CHAPTER II

THE DUKE OF MARCHMONT.

A YEAR had passed away—it was now the summer of 1827—when the English newspapers gave some meagre and scantily outlined account of a deplorable catastrophe which had taken place on an American river. A pleasure-vessel, having a numerous party on board, amongst whom were several gentlemen attached to the English Embassy in the United States, had been upset in a sudden squall—and every soul had perished. The paragraph gave the names of some of the principal personages who had thus met their death: and amongst those names was that of Bertram Vivian.

Captain Lacey was reading an Oxford paper one morning after breakfast, when this paragraph met his eyes; and the sudden ejaculation which burst from his lips, caused Eliza to question him with trembling anxiety as to the source of his emotions. He dared not conceal the fact from her: but ere he showed her the paragragh itself, he gradually broke the fatal truth. Even before he had finished, poor Eliza comprehended it all! Not a tear escaped her eyes—no word fell from her lips: but pale as marble, she sat the image of dull, deep, blank despair. Her father caught her in his arms: then the flood-gates of her ineffable affliction were opened—and she wept long, bitterly, agonizingly! Oh, for the hopes which that heart had cherished, to be thus blighted all in a moment!—Oh, for the fabric of expectant bliss which her faithful and trusting soul had built up, to be thus shattered in an instant! It was too cruel. Captain Lacey, with the tears running down his wrinkled cheeks, besought her to calm her sorrow for *his* sake: but the entreaty was a long time vain. Hours passed ere Eliza could even bring herself to think deliberately upon this fearful loss: days passed ere she could awaken herself to a sense of the necessity of a pious and holy resignation to the will of heaven. And during these days, it appeared to her as if it were all a dream, and that her brain was only morbidly reeling beneath the weight of some imagined calamity. In the night she would start up from a feverish and troubled sleep—wakened as if by the anguished voice of a drowning one thrilling on her ears,—and pressing her hands violently to her throbbing temples, she would ask herself if it could possibly be true. At length this dream-like state of being passed away, and left her to the astounding sense of the awful reality. She prayed to heaven for strength to bear up against it: but there were times when she felt as if she were going mad. Then, passionately—Oh, how passionately, would she press Bertram's ring to her lips; and in this memento of his love in other and happier days, was her only consolation. Alas, how poor a one!—and yet it *was* a solace, though feeble as the last thread which retains the invalid to existence in the depth of a malady when the crisis for best or worst is come!

Misfortunes never arrive alone. But a few weeks after the receipt of the intelligence from the United States, a fire broke out in Captain Lacey's house; and so rapid was the spread of the devastating element, that all three dwellings were reduced in a few brief hours to blackened ruins. Scarcely an article of furniture was saved: the inmates considered themselves fortunate in escaping with life alone. But this was not the full extent of the terrible calamity. Fire insurance was not so generally practised in 1827 as it is now-a-days; and unfortunately Captain Lacey's property was not insured. The principal source of his income was thus cut off irretrievably—

irreparably; and he found himself in his old age, with ill-health and infirmities growing rapidly upon him, reduced to his half-pay—a mere scanty pittance. And this too would die with him. What was to become of his daughter at his death—— Oh, what? There was yet another misfortune in store for the poor Captain and Eliza: for their faithful domestic, who had been with them so many years, was thrown upon a sick-bed through the shock occasioned by the fire; and in a few days she breathed her last.

There was a widow lady in London named Mrs. Bailey, who was very distantly related to Captain Lacey, and with whom he had corresponded at distant intervals. She was rich—occupied a splendid mansion at the West End of the metropolis—frequented the best society—and gave grand parties. A thorough woman of the world, she had all the callousness, amounting almost to heartlessness, usually characteristic of one who makes fashionable appearances her whole and sole study. The only notice she had condescended to take of her humble and poor relations at Oxford, was the sending them a basket of game and a turkey at Christmas, accompanied by a brief note conveying the compliments of the season; and the acknowledgment of the gift, together with an expression of similar compliments, formed the extent of the Captain's periodical correspondence with Mrs. Bailey. But now that the poor Captain had such anxious cares relative to his daughter, he wrote a long letter to Mrs. Bailey, detailing the serious alteration of his circumstances in consequence of the fire. In this letter he spoke with a father's pride of the exquisite beauty of Eliza, the amiability of her disposition, and her dutiful conduct as a daughter,—adding that his means had enabled him, though by dint of great sacrifices, to give her an education not altogether apart from certain elegant accomplishments. Now, this letter arrived at a time when Mrs. Bailey felt the want of some new attraction to give zest to her entertainments, which the fashionable world began to consider rather "slow affairs," the same faces being constantly met in Mrs. Bailey's drawing-rooms. The idea struck her that her requirement might be fulfilled in the person of Miss Lacey, if she were even only half as beautiful as the paternal pride had depicted her. She accordingly lost no time in writing back to Oxford, assuring Captain Lacey, with much seeming kindness in the wording of her letter, that she sympathized deeply with him in his misfortunes; and inviting himself and Eliza to come and pass a few months with her in Grosvenor Square. She enclosed a bank-note for twenty pounds,—begging that the remittance might not be taken as an offence, but merely as a subsidy to defray the travelling expenses of those who were about to confer an obligation on herself by giving her their companionship.

Captain Lacey was overjoyed at this really unexpected goodness, as he considered it, on the part of his relative. Eliza would fain have lingered a few weeks longer at Oxford, to compose her mind somewhat after so many recent and frightful calamities: but she saw that her father was now all anxiety to get to London—and with her wonted amiable submissiveness, she stifled the half-prayer, half-remonstrance which had risen to her lips. The preparations they had to make were few; and they quitted the humble lodging to which they had retired after the conflagration had deprived them of their home. During the journey, Captain Lacey implored and enjoined his daughter to render herself as agreeable as possible to Mrs. Bailey,—by which, in plain terms, he meant that Eliza was to shake off her low spirits and her looks of sadness by all means in her power. Misfortunes as well as anxieties on his daughter's account, had rendered Captain Lacey worldly-minded and selfish: he hoped that in Mrs. Bailey's gay saloons, Eliza would captivate some wealthy personage;—and ever ready to jump at conclusions, the Captain regarded it as almost as good as settled that Eliza should form a brilliant alliance. He did not however impart his views to his daughter; and the poor maiden little suspected that he was dreaming of fresh matrimonial projects on her behalf, within only a few weeks after the receipt of the frightful intelligence which had given a death-blow to the former ones. Though inwardly full of sadness—though feeling that, the first affections of her heart being so cruelly blighted, she never again could love—indeed though considering it to be a sacred duty to cling to the image of her lost Bertram,—Eliza assumed as much external calmness as she could possibly call to her aid; while the natural vigour of her constitution had prevented the bitterness of affliction from making any ravages upon her beauty, beyond chasing away the colour from her cheeks. Therefore when she arrived in London, and was introduced to her relative Mrs. Bailey, she appeared to be of a loveliness so exquisite and so interesting, with the expression of pensiveness upon her countenance, that the old lady, in the enthusiasm of joy, gave both herself and her father a welcome that seemed disinterestedly cordial.

It was the month of September when the Laceys arrived in London; and the greater portion of the fashionable world being out of town, it was not the season for Mrs. Bailey's parties. She herself seldom went out of town: she disliked the country—hated the sea-side—and would not for worlds give up the amusements of shopping in Regent and Bond Streets. It was therefore fortunate for Eliza's state of mind that she was not at once called upon to appear in the midst of crowded assemblies; and during the three months which now passed after her arrival in London, her grief for her lover's loss settled itself into such a holy resignation that she was no longer agitated with paroxysms of wild grief and convulsive weepings. But the expression of her eyes grew softer: a melancholy pensiveness settled upon her features,—relieved however by that half-sad half-sweet smile which resignation gives to the human countenance, and which is so touchingly interesting when on the beautiful face of woman.

The year 1827 was drawing towards its close, when the gaieties of the metropolis commenced. At first there were only small parties at Mrs. Bailey's house: but these grew larger and larger in proportion as the members of the fashionable world flocked back to their town-mansions. Thus Eliza was not precipitated all in a moment into the midst of brilliant assemblies: she was led on by degrees to become accustomed to the bustle, animation, and gaiety of West-End society; and though she would infinitely rather have remained

in the solitude of her own chamber, to reflect on the image of the lost one,—yet she yielded to the entreaties of her father that she would make herself agreeable to Mrs. Bailey in all things; and it was precisely to shine as a star that Mrs. Bailey had invited her to London.

Eliza Lacey soon became the object of universal admiration. Her beauty was considered to be naturally of a pensive and touchingly interesting cast: no one except her father knew how recent incidents had softened the former sunlight of her loveliness into this half-subdued tone When in the midst of a brilliant company, with flowers upon her brow and diamonds on her neck, none of those who surrounded her suspected that the former rested above a brain that had throbbed to the most harrowing affliction—or that the latter lay above a heart where love, the fairest of all the gems of the soul, had become lustreless for ever.

It was in the first month of the year 1828 that Mrs. Bailey gave a more than usually grand party, for the purpose of doing honour to a guest of the highest rank who was to be present. This was the Duke of Marchmont. He was a man in his fifty-fifth year—tall and upright—of a lofty demeanour —a severe and thoughtful expression of countenance. His bearing had all the aristocratic hauteur of his high rank, attempered however by the manners of a polished gentleman. His face was long —his features were prominent—his complexion was pale, almost to sallowness: but he had evidently been very handsome in his time, and might still be pronounced a fine man. His hair and whiskers, once dark, were now of a grayish tinge: but his teeth were so admirably preserved, and so singularly white for a person of his age, that when he smiled, they gave to his countenance a younger aspect. He had never been married, and had not

until recently worn a ducal coronet upon his brow.

Such was the Duke of Marchmont—a nobleman possessed of great wealth, with a splendid town-mansion, and three palatial residences, with their accompanying estates, in three distinct counties. Many a cap, to use a vulgar phrase, was therefore set at this great peer: many a manœuvring mother made excruciating efforts to lead the ducal attention to her marriageable daughters. Hitherto all in vain!—but on the night of Mrs. Bailey's grand entertainment, his Grace's heart seemed to be smitten—he was evidently fascinated with the bewitching beauty of one fair creature there—and this was Eliza Lacey. But the young lady herself was the only one present who did not observe anything pointed or marked in the Duke's attentions. Mingled with her resignation, there was a kind of dreamy, listless apathy which still clung to her, as if the senses had not as yet completely recovered the stunning influence of the blow they had received several months back. Weeks passed on: at every entertainment given by Mrs. Bailey, the Duke of Marchmont was sure to be present: at whatsoever house Eliza visited in company with her relative, there was the Duke likewise sure to be. He was paying his addresses to her as visibly and as sedulously as a man could: everybody else saw and knew it—the object of these attentions alone remained unaware that they were proffered. She still continued to look forth upon the world as if from the midst of a mental dreaminess within: there was something more mechanical than voluntary in her conversation, her looks, and her smiles—in her bearing too, and in all her movements. But inasmuch as there was a consistent uniformity in her tone and demeanour, with an ineffable sweetness over all, it could not possibly have struck any but the very closest observer of human nature, that in the still waters of her soul a profound grief lay buried. Such observers are not often found in the gay circles of fashionable life; and the Duke of Marchmont himself, though shrewd and intelligent, was not much versed in the reading of the female heart.

At length the Duke took an opportunity to make an offer of his hand to Miss Lacey. She heard him with an astonishment perfectly bewildering, but which gave to her an air of modest maidenly confusion. She could not utter a word: a veil had suddenly fallen from her eyes—the haze through which she had looked upon things around her, abruptly yielded to clearness. She comprehended for the first time that she had been the object of attentions bestowed for several months, and that in the very dreaminess and listlessness of her mind, she might have seemed to regard them as welcome because she had accepted them. It was one afternoon when the Duke called at Mrs. Bailey's house, and when he found Eliza alone in the drawing-room, that he made her the offer of his hand. Taking her bewildered amazement and the subsequent emotions for bashful confusion, and this confusion for a tacit assent, he raised her hand to his lips—kissed it with respectful tenderness—and intimating that he would seek her father, quitted the room. Then, more vividly perhaps than for some time past it had done, rose up before Eliza's mental vision the image of the lost Bertram; and clasping her hands convulsively, she sat in dismay—indeed almost in horror—under the crushing influence of the thought that she had unwittingly proved faithless to that image. The ring with the initial B was in her bosom: it ever lay next to her heart. She drew it forth, kissing it in the resuscitated wildness of her grief; while the tears flowed in torrents from her eyes.

She had grown comparatively calm again—the ring was replaced in her bosom—the traces of her weeping were wiped away—and she was deliberately reflecting how to disabuse the Duke of Marchmont of the error into which he had fallen in supposing that his attentions were agreeable to her, when the door opened and her father entered the room. Though full of infirmities, the old man rushed towards her—caught her in his arms—strained her to his breast—and ere she could give utterance to a word, poured forth a perfect deluge of language,—thanking her for having accepted her ducal suitor—congratulating himself on living to behold his daughter on the verge of so brilliant an alliance—declaring that his mind was relieved from a myriad anxieties—and ending by assuring her that his gray hairs would now go down in contented resignation to the grave. Eliza was shocked, astounded, and bewildered. She saw that her father's mind was bent upon this match, and that it would literally break his heart if she rejected the ducal overture. Yet her brain whirled: it was almost maddened at the idea of becoming another's—she who in her own soul had vowed a life of celibacy to the memory of her lost lover! Her father renewed his thanks—renewed his own self-congratulations — wept, laughed, danced, and behaved like the veriest child. Mrs. Bailey entered in the midst of this scene; and embracing Eliza, proffered her own congratulations. The poor young lady was overwhelmed with all these demonstrations of exuberant joy: she strove to speak — her tongue refused utterance to what she would have said—her emotions choked her; and when she burst into tears, she was again embraced by her father and Mrs. Bailey in their turns.

In the course of that day, however, she found an opportunity to speak with her sire alone; and she also spoke with calmness. She assured him that she did not love the Duke—that the love she had borne for Bertram, was the first and the last of which her soul was susceptible—and that her heart was entombed in the watery depths which had engulfed the adored lost one. Captain Lacey was at first half frantic at the idea of his daughter rejecting this brilliant alliance; he wept—he knelt—he prayed—he beat his breast—he tore his hair—he threw himself, grovelling in wretchedness, upon the carpet. Oh! could the affectionate daughter resist that spectacle?—she who had ever entertained so illimitable a sense of the many, many sacrifices her father had made for her—she who had always held herself ready to make any sacrifice for him! We will not dwell upon this distressing scene; suffice it to say that at the expiration of an hour—in which all the acutest feelings through which the human soul can pass were essentialized and concentrated — Eliza yielded. With the resignation of martyrdom—with the calm pale statue-like despair of a victim consenting to self-immolation for some purpose of stupendous import, she agreed to become the bride of the Duke of Marchmont.

But there was one stipulation which she positively laid down. It was now the close of April, 1828: upwards of a couple of months must elapse until the two years should be completed since her father's written pledge to Bertram Vivian that under certain circumstances the engagement with him should be renewed; and though the afflicted Eliza entertained not the faintest hope that there was the possibility of aught occurring, or of a miracle being wrought, to give scope for those circumstances,—it nevertheless seemed a superstitiously sacred duty that the full time should run out. And it required also two complete months to finish the year since the intelligence had reached her of Bertram's death; and though circumstances had prevented her from wearing sable garments as a tribute to his memory, her heart at least required the completion of a year's mourning——a mourning, however, that she knew would be eternal! Her stipulation therefore was that the bridal-day—the day of her immense self-sacrifice—should not be fixed at any date earlier than the month of July. To this her father readily promised concurrence: the principal point was gained—and that was sufficient.

The interval passed far too quickly for the afflicted Eliza: but outwardly she suffered no traces of her soul's utter despair to present themselves. She had made up her mind to self-immolation: she resolved that her martyrdom should excruciate only herself. She felt that she had no right to suffer the Duke to perceive that she was a victim: neither did she wish to mar the happiness which her father was now experiencing in the last days of his existence. In short, she armed herself with a preterhuman courage; and but for the paleness of her cheeks and the slight deepening of the air of pensive sadness upon her countenance, no one could have told that another dagger had been driven into her already too cruelly wounded heart.

On the 10th of July, 1828, the marriage was solemnized, with some degree of privacy, and only in the midst of a select circle,—none of the Duke's relatives being present. His Grace had his own reasons for not inviting to the bridal those who were most nearly allied to him; inasmuch as his marriage was a fatal blow—or at least might prove so, if blessed with issue—to all who would profit by his death if he remained single. And Captain Lacey had his own reasons likewise for encouraging the Duke in the idea of private nuptials: but what these reasons were, he explained not beforehand to his daughter. She herself asked no questions: she knew not even the names of the Duke's relatives, nor who they were: she sought to know nothing more than circumstances brought to her knowledge —and this knowledge was limited to the fact that he on whom she bestowed her hand was the Duke of Marchmont, and that she was now a Duchess.

CHAPTER III.

THE DUCHESS OF MARCHMONT.

THE ceremony was over—the wedding breakfast, given by Mrs. Bailey, and which was of a most splendid description, likewise reached an end—the instant was approaching when Eliza, now Duchess of Marchmont, was to bid adieu to her father and her relative, and accompany her husband to whichsoever of the country-seats it was where the honeymoon was to be passed—but which the young bride knew not. She was even ignorant of the very names of them all. Retiring from the breakfast-table, she sought the chamber where her maid was in readiness to assist her in making the requisite change in her apparel for the journey; and it struck strange—almost unnatural to Eliza's ear when she was addressed as "your grace" and "my lady." Her toilet being finished, she repaired to a parlour where she knew, according to an intimation given by her maid, that her father wished to say a few words to her in private, and bestow without restraint the last embrace before she was separated from him. There she found the old man in a state of happiness strangely blended with a nervous excitement—but assuredly not with grief at the prospect of parting. Not but that he loved his daughter dearly, as the reader well knows: his pride however was too highly gratified—his relief from cares on account of her future welfare, was too complete—and perhaps his satisfaction at the result of his plans was too full, to leave room for aught savouring of sorrow. Only that nervous excitement was blended, as a sort of alloy, with his other feelings; and this the unsophisticated Eliza took for the tinge of grief which it was natural to suppose that he experienced, but which he really did not feel.

"My dearest girl," he said, clasping her in his arms, "your beauty and your worth have raised you to the highest pinnacle. Once more—and for the last time—must I allude to something connected with the past."

Here the Duchess shuddered as if with a glacial chill shooting through her, although it was the sultry month of July. Her pale countenance became paler; and her hand was instinctively placed upon her heart—for there was Bertram Vivian's ring concealed!

"Only a few words," said Captain Lacey quickly —for he saw this emotion and comprehended it. "You now belong to another: you are the bride of a nobleman whose honour is unimpeachable, as his rank is lofty and his wealth immense. I need scarcely tell you, Eliza, that he knows nothing of the past; and if you be wise—if you be prudent—if indeed you wish to be kind and considerate towards him, you will cherish *that* as your own secret——or rather forget that it ever was!"

"I cannot, father," said Eliza, in a low deep voice. "I cannot forget it! But, as you have observed, it is *my* secret—and it shall remain so. Let me relieve you of all apprehension on that head. I am now the Duke's wife: I comprehend all that is becoming on my part in my new position. I should feel honoured and flattered by his preference of me, did I possess a heart still capable of being moved by such feelings: but at least I shall be careful not to wound nor shock my husband by suffering him to know that I have loved another—that I cannot love *him*—that the power of loving a second time is dead within me!"

"Dearest daughter," exclaimed Captain Lacey, "I am delighted and distressed to hear you speak thus!—delighted to find that you so admirably ap-

preciate the duties of your new position—distressed to think that the memory of the past is still so strong within you."

"Father," replied Eliza, earnestly, "distress not yourself on my account. It is done: I am resigned, if I be not contented. No—distress not yourself: but God grant that all possible happiness may be yours for the remainder of your days!"—and as she uttered these last words, tears trickled slowly down the pale checks of the Duchess of Marchmont.

"Eliza, my darling!" said the old man, much moved; "let me see you exercise a becoming fortitude!"

"I am strong—and I am calm too again, father," responded the Duchess, wiping away her tears. "What other counsel have you to give me ere we separate?"

"Only a few words more," resumed Captain Lacey. "I might say much—I might tell you many things—but the time is too short now—the carriage is at the door—your ducal husband is waiting to bear away his beloved bride. And moreover," continued the old man, with an increase of that nervous excitement which his daughter mistook for sorrow at the approach of the parting moment, "it would arouse too many painful feelings—too many sad recollections. But yet, my darling daughter, there *are* a few words which must be spoken. You may perhaps shortly hear names mentioned in your presence, which will vividly recall that past to which I have alluded. You may discover too, that your marriage has given you connexions which——But no matter! It is only a single word of parting advice that I have time or fortitude enough to proffer; and that is to conjure you to be upon your guard, so that whatever you may hear shall not lead you to betray to your husband that you were at one time the betrothed of another."

"Father," replied the Duchess, with a glacial firmness of tone and a statue-like immoveability of features and of form, so that not a muscle of her countenance was stirred by affliction, nor the folds of her splendid scarf agitated by the bosom's heavings,—"you have seen with what fortitude I have passed through the ordeal of this day's ceremony: you have seen likewise that by my conduct I have never once given the Duke of Marchmont ground for the supposition that he is an object of the merest indifference to me. By all this let my future conduct be judged: by what I am, you may estimate what I shall be. Yes—I *am* firm. My destiny is fixed—and I accept it. Even if *he* whose image is dearer to me than I can express, were by a miracle to be brought back to life—were he suddenly to stand before me—I feel that I am nerved with the courage——it may be of despair—but nevertheless it *is* the courage that alone is adequate to support me even through such an ordeal as that. Now, father, are you satisfied?"

Singular and incomprehensible was for an instant the expression which flitted over the old man's features: the next moment it was succeeded by one of gladness, indubitable—unmistakable; and straining his daughter to his breast, he exclaimed, "I thank thee, beloved Eliza, for these assurances. Go, my darling: the moment is come for us to separate! Go: and may a father's blessing attend thee as a talisman to keep thy mind thus firm—thus nerved!"

The young Duchess was to a certain extent struck by her father's look, manner, and words, which appeared somewhat singular: but Mrs. Bailey entered at the moment to announce that the carriage was in readiness. She embraced her sire again—she embraced her relative also; and then issuing forth, found her husband ready to escort her to the magnificent equipage.

And now she was seated by that husband's side in the carriage with ducal arms emblazoned on the panels, symbolic of the almost princely rank to which that day she had been admitted as a partner. The four horses, guided and urged along by the two expert postilions, dashed through the streets; and in a short space London was left behind. Eliza,—while responding with that pensive sweetness which had become habitual to her, to the remarks which the Duke made,—revolved in her soul all the details of the parting counsel which her father had given to her; and it was not very long before her presence of mind and her fortitude were put to the test. For in the course of an affectionate and endearing speech, the Duke gave her to understand that they were on their way to the most splendid of his three country-seats—that it was situated in Hampshire—and that its name was Oaklands.

A glacial thrill shot through her like an electric shock at the mention of that name: but she was so completely on her guard, that her countenance betrayed naught of what was agitating within. In case however that it should, she looked from the window for a few moments, as if contemplating the scenery by which they were passing: but she gazed on vacancy. Oaklands!—that was the country-seat to which Bertram Vivian had repaired when he parted from her at Oxford; and it belonged to the family of which he himself was a scion. How, then, could it now be in the possession of the Duke her husband?

"We shall be there," continued his Grace, "completely by ourselves at first; and this seclusion, my beloved Eliza, I hope will not prove disagreeable or monotonous."

"Nothing, my lord," she answered, with her accustomed sweet amiability, "that is consistent with your will and pleasure, can be objectionable to me."

"Thanks, my sweet Eliza, for that response:"—and her husband pressed her hand to his lips. "In due time you will be introduced to the other members of the family—or rather they will be presented to you: and then we will have a gay company at Oaklands. Your father and Mrs. Bailey shall join us; and my own sweet Eliza shall do the honours of the house of which I am proud and happy to make her the mistress."

The Duchess gave a suitable response; and as the journey was continued, the discourse was continued also: but nothing more was said by the Duke to put his bride's fortitude and presence of mind to the test. Yet Oaklands—that name of Oaklands—kept agitating in her brain. She longed to ask her husband how it was that this estate had fallen into his possession—but she dared not; and as he said naught upon the subject, she supposed he either took it for granted that she was already informed thereon, or else that he considered it to be a matter of but little moment.

After a four hours' rapid drive, the Duke informed Eliza that they were now entering upon the estate; and in another half-hour an antique edifice, appearing above the embowering groves, broke upon the view. This was Oaklands. And she was about to set foot within those walls—to tread where Bertram had trodden—to sit where he had sat—to gaze upon objects which were familiar to him in his lifetime! As the equipage dashed along a noble sweep of carriage-way through a vast and superbly wooded park, she thought to herself that every tree which reared its stately head there, had been known to Bertram—that she was now passing amongst scenes where he also had passed—she was breathing as it were the very air which he had breathed. It was sufficient to resuscitate all the anguish of her affliction for his loss: it was enough to overpower her with irresistible emotions! But her soul was nerved with a preterhuman fortitude; and however much she might have felt internally, her pale countenance betrayed nothing of all this.

The equipage dashed up to the front of the splendid mansion; and troops of domestics came forth from the hall to welcome their ducal master and his lovely bride. She ascended to a chamber to change her dress; and perhaps if she had been alone, she might have given way to the pent-up feelings that were agitating in her soul. But she was attended by two maids; and she dared not betray any inordinate emotion in their presence.

Some days passed, during which nothing particular occurred that requires mention. In the meanwhile the Duchess had inspected all the apartments of the immense mansion; and though, by the sumptuous elegance of the fashionable dwellings she had seen in London, she was prepared for all the evidences of boundless wealth in her new home,—yet its splendour far eclipsed all her foreshadowings. One portion only remained unvisited; and this was the picture-gallery, which was under repair at the time of her arrival. Those repairs were finished; and one morning the Duke proposed that she should inspect the place,—which contained, as he stated, not only some paintings by eminent masters, but likewise the portraits of many of his oldest ancestors, as well as of his relatives who were more recently deceased. Thither they repaired. The paintings by the great masters occurred first in the gallery; and then came the portraits. Those of the Duke's elder ancestors engendered no particular sentiment beyond mere interest and curiosity: but when Eliza reached those of the relatives who were but recently deceased, strange thoughts and feelings began to take birth in her mind,—thoughts that seemed to be expanding into memories—feelings that appeared to connect the present with the past: and as she gazed with a growing wonderment, and even with consternation, the bewildering fancy which was at first dim, vague, and shapeless, strengthened into a conviction that there was in these portraits a pervasive family similitude from which a never-to-be-forgotten image was neither estranged nor disconnected. But the last portrait of all which hung in the array of successive family delineations——Eliza almost shrieked out as her eyes riveted their looks upon it! It represented a much older man than Bertram: but the resemblance between them was so striking, it seemed as if the original could have been none other than Bertram's father.

Strange suspicions and wild fancies swept through Eliza's mind; but all her agitation was concentrated within. The very tremor which thrilled through her, was one of the soul rather than of the body: outwardly she was calm and serene—or at least the Duke observed nothing strange nor unusual on the part of his wife. For a moment she averted her eyes from the portrait. She thought—she hoped, that what she fancied might be a delusion produced by the circumstance of *one* image being ever uppermost in her mind, and that therefore perhaps in her morbid imaginings she beheld that image to a certain degree reflected in the canvass before her. But as again she glanced along the array of the last half-dozen scions of her husband's family, or rather their representations there,—back to her mind came the conviction that it was no creation of the fancy, but that the pervasive resemblance *was* there,—commencing feebly with the scion most remote, strengthening visibly with each of those that followed, until settling into that unmistakable similitude of a paternal prototype. Therefore again were her eyes riveted upon this last; and all her acutest memories were painfully revived,—memories of the lost—the dead—the ever loved, the ever to be deplored!

"That," said the Duke, who still perceived nothing strange on the part of his wife, but merely attributed to a natural curiosity and interest the intentness with which her survey was fixed upon the last portrait of all those belonging to the family into which she had so recently entered,—"that one represents my younger brother, the late Lord Clandon, who died a little more than a year back. It was most unfortunate!—just after he had been raised to the Peerage, at the same time that my Marquisate was elevated to a Dukedom."

"And the title of your Marquisate, my lord?" said Eliza in a tone of inquiry; and though she stood still as a marble statue, ineffable feelings were agitating within.

"The title to which I succeeded by the death of an old uncle a little more than two years back," replied her husband, "was that of Viviandale. Shortly afterwards it was elevated to the Dukedom of Marchmont. That same death rendered my younger brother Lord Vivian—but a lord only by courtesy; and he was raised to the Peerage by the style and title of Baron Clandon."

"And previously to that death which first of all made him a lord by courtesy," said the Duchess, "I presume he was simply the Hon. Mr. Vivian? Forgive my ignorance on these subjects——"

And she stopped short. Not another word could she utter: more powerful still—indeed almost overwhelming, were the feelings that agitated in her soul.

"I am charmed, dearest, that you thus question me," responded the uxorious Duke; "and I am delighted to answer your questions. Yes—my younger brother was merely the Hon. Mr. Vivian until about two years back. But, as I was explaining to you just now, it is a little more than a year since he died suddenly. Ah, Eliza! there were cruel circumstances connected with his death. In a word, he received a very painful shock. It was the intelligence from America that his

younger son—his best beloved—had perished—— Good heavens, Eliza dearest! are you ill?"

"No, my lord—no—it is nothing, I can assure you," said the Duchess quickly, as she instantaneously recovered her self-possession. "This place struck cold to me——"

"Yes, dearest—it *is* cold," said the uxorious Duke, though in reality the sultry sun of July was pouring its effulgence upon the entire glowing scene without. "The painters and gilders, the burnishers and decorators, as well as the picture-cleaners, have been here. But perhaps it is the odour of turpentine and paint which has even affected you more than the cold? Come—let us away. We will revisit the gallery on another occasion."

Eliza, pale as a marble statue, took her husband's arm, and accompanied him forth from the gallery. On the landing without, they encountered one of the footmen; and the Duke bade him express his displeasure to the steward for not having taken measures to rid the gallery of the disagreeable odour which filled it. He moreover ordered fires to be lighted there,—declaring that it was damp, and that what with the exhalation of the paint and the moist chill, her Grace had been rendered quite unwell. Eliza pleaded headache, and withdrew to her own boudoir—where she shut herself up to deliberate on all that had just passed.

A veil had fallen from her eyes. She now understood full well—*too* well—the meaning of those words of caution which her father had uttered in the last moments preceding their separation. She had married into the very family to which Bertram belonged: her husband was none other than the uncle of her lost loved one! That her father all along knew such to be the case, she could not possibly conceal from herself: but that the fact had been religiously concealed from her, both by her parent and Mrs. Bailey, was equally certain. That the Duke himself should never have spoken in a manner to make her aware of the circumstance, was not to be wondered at: for he had never talked to her about any of his relatives at all;—and this silence on his part she could now likewise understand. For a man of his years to take unto himself a young wife, was of course galling to that expectant kindred which had so much to gain by his dying childless. It would therefore have been a delicate topic for him to touch upon; and without any other motive had he avoided it: for he himself was utterly ignorant of bygone circumstances in respect to Eliza and Bertram—ignorant even that they had ever been acquainted. It was still farther apparent that in respect to the Vivian family, certain promotions in the aristocratic hierarchy had given loftier titles, accompanied by changes in their distinctive names; so that not for an instant could she have possibly suspected that the Marquis of Viviandale had been elevated into the ducal grandeur of Marchmont; and if by chance the name of Lord Clandon had ever fallen upon her ear, she would have had no possible clue to associate it with the family to which the lost Bertram had belonged. But now she comprehended it all; and again and again recurred the astounding thought that by a wondrous combination of circumstances she had entered the family which it was at one time the hope of her heart to enter—but that this entrance was effected, not as at that time she had so fondly anticipated—it was by her becoming the bride of the uncle, and not of the dearly cherished nephew, that the consummation was brought about!

Oh, how she had been sacrificed! But so strong was the filial feeling in the bosom of this excellent young lady—so completely was it interwoven in her very nature—that even in the depth of her own anguished feelings she sought excuses for her father. He had longed to behold her settled in life: it was, after all, natural that his ambition should covet this haughty alliance for his daughter: he had acted only with the conscientiousness of a parent; and if in so doing he had driven deeper down into her heart the dagger that was already planted there, it was with no studied intent to inflict additional pain. No rancour therefore might her gentle bosom harbour against him;—and to strengthen herself in the continuance of her filial love—to fortify also the extenuation which she conjured up for whatsoever duplicity or concealment there might have been in his recent conduct, she bethought herself of all the manifold sacrifices he had made for her in her girlhood. Yet amidst all these reflections, would come the sickening, blighting, blasting one that she had been rendered by circumstances doubly perfidious, as it were, to the memory of the lost but ever loved—that she had not merely become the wife of another, but *that other* a near relative of the cherished and deplored one. A vague sense of having committed even a crime—a dim undefined idea of having been thrown into a position which by its associations and connexions revolted against the natural purity of her thoughts—filled her soul with consternation and dismay. But it was done—her destiny was fixed—and she must bear her burden and resign herself to the lot in the best manner that she could. Above all, she must scrupulously continue to veil from her husband the sorrow which rested in the depths of her soul—that hidden sorrow which she would carry with her to the grave!

About six weeks passed away; and the portrait-gallery was *not* revisited. If ever the Duke started a proposition of the kind, Eliza was ready with a suggestion for some other recreative pursuit. There was this part of the estate still to visit, or there was that part which she should like to see again. In the same way too, when occasionally her husband seemed to be approaching the topic of his younger brother's death and the causes which led to it,—Eliza was equally ready with some observation to turn the discourse into quite another channel; and in order to do this effectually, she would assume a sudden liveliness, perfectly genuine in the estimation of the enraptured and uxorious Duke, but in reality fraught with the nervousness of a feverish excitement often bordering on the hysterical.

Thus the period of the honeymoon passed away, and one morning, at breakfast-time, the Duke of Marchmont said, "My dearest Eliza, we may now think of deviating somewhat from the routine which perhaps is becoming monotonous to you. We must have a little gaiety at Oaklands; and to tell you the truth, I had arranged what ought to have been a surprise for you—but I cannot keep the secret any longer. Your father and Mrs. Bailey will be here in the afternoon. Our friends

Sir William and Lady Lomax and their three daughters—who were present, you know, at the happy ceremony which made you mine—are likewise coming to pass a week with us. Tell me, dear Eliza—are you pleased with these arrangements?"

The Duke studied his utmost to render himself and all his plans agreeable to his young bride; and with her habitual amiability, she expressed her gratitude and her satisfaction.

"And there is another guest too, whom we may expect this evening in time for the dinner-hour," continued the Duke. "My nephew, Lord Clandon, who has just returned from a long Continental tour, has written to offer his congratulations on my marriage, and to express his earnest desire to pay his respects to my beautiful Duchess. The letter is altogether nicely and prettily worded—with a manly generosity and frankness too, for which," added the Duke almost involuntarily, and in a sort of musing strain, "I should scarcely have given Hugh credit. However," he went on hastily to observe, as if ashamed at having thus betrayed even the slightest fear as to the impression which his marriage might have made upon his nephew,—"I have answered him kindly, and invited him to visit us."

Again did the mention of that name of Clandon call up with painful vividness the memories of the past—those memories which were in reality never absent from Eliza's mind, but which unless thus stirred up, floated only with the sereneness of resignation, as a sort of perpetual under-current of the thoughts. Yet though thus strongly agitated within, her countenance betrayed nothing of what she felt.

In the course of the afternoon Mrs. Bailey's travelling-chariot dashed up to the grand entrance of Oaklands; and Eliza was clasped in the arms of her father. He mistook the filial enthusiasm of her embrace for an evidence of complete satisfaction and happiness on account of the alliance which she had formed; and whatsoever apprehensions had previously filled his mind on that score, were dissipated in a moment. But when Eliza came to regard Captain Lacey attentively, she perceived that he was looking exceedingly ill—and that the smiles which her presence and his own relieved thoughts conjured up, beamed upon a countenance that was thin, haggard, and careworn. She comprehended all that he must have felt on her account—his deep anxiety lest his parting injunctions should have been disregarded, and that she might have betrayed the past when made aware of the family into which she had married. Pained by his appearance, she lavished upon him the most tender caresses; and the old man's happiness now appeared as complete as the pride of his ambition had already been. As for Mrs. Bailey, it was a proud thing for her to be enabled to salute a Duchess as her relative; so that in the increased consequence and importance which it gave her, she found infinite reason for self-congratulation at having taken the Captain and his daughter by the hand in the moment of their need.

A little later in the afternoon Sir William and Lady Lomax, with their three daughters, arrived; and as the dinner-hour drew near, several other guests—dwellers in the neighbourhood of Oaklands—were introduced. But still there was one to arrive whose appearance Eliza deeply dreaded. This was Lord Clandon. When at Oxford, she had never seen Hugh: she was likewise aware that Bertram had never breathed to his brother a syllable of their love; and it was not therefore through fear that *this* would be betrayed to the Duke, that the Duchess dreaded to encounter Lord Clandon. But she thought to herself that if Lord Clandon bore a resemblance to the lost Bertram, her presence of mind would be put to the sorest, severest test it had as yet experienced, and she would have to pass through an ordeal fraught with anguish and mental agony to which the tortures of the rack were paradise in comparison. But the dinner-hour came—and Lord Clandon made not his appearance. After waiting some time, the Duke decided that the banquet should be served up. It was so—the ladies in due course adjourned to the drawing-room—where in another hour they were joined by the gentlemen. It was now past nine o'clock; and Eliza was just congratulating herself that the dreaded meeting would be postponed until the following day,—when the sounds of an equipage dashing up to the front of the mansion, reached her ears. Now she summoned all her fortitude to her aid—all her presence of mind. Sir William Lomax — a tall, thin, aristocratic-looking man, far advanced in years—was conversing with her at the time; and this perhaps was fortunate for her,—inasmuch as if younger and more penetrating eyes had been fixed upon her countenance, the evidences of a strong inward trouble might have been read. The drawing-room door was thrown open; and a domestic announced in a loud voice, "Lord Clandon."

The Duke greeted his nephew warmly; and there was something in his cordial clasp of the hand which seemed to convey a heartfelt gratitude for the generous, frank, and magnanimous manner in which Hugh had expressed himself with regard to a marriage which he had in reality so little reason to like. For Lord Clandon, in default of issue, was the heir to the estates and title of Marchmont; and this alliance on the part of his uncle with a young wife only just twenty-one years of age, naturally gave every promise that Hugh's hopes and expectations would be disappointed.

"Welcome, my dear nephew, to Oaklands," said the Duke. "And now permit me at once to present you to one to whom you are anxious to become known."

Eliza had not dared fling even a single glance towards the door when it opened. She rose from her seat, and stood motionless,—a wild excitement in her mind, but with all the outward appearance of the unstudied grace of a serene and dignified self-possession. There was confusion in her brain—a veil before her eyes: Sir William Lomax was saying something to her—she knew not what it was. His voice and the voices of all the others in the room, seemed like an unintelligible blending of humming, droning sounds. She heard persons approaching her: then her husband's voice said, "Eliza, I have pleasure in introducing my nephew, Lord Clandon."

All in an instant she became vividly, frightfully, terribly aware of the necessity of exerting

her fortitude to the utmost. And it came, like a wondrous inspiration. She raised her eyes: she beheld before her a fine, tall, handsome man—really not more than a few months past four-and-twenty, though looking three or four years older. His hair was of jetty darkness, and wanted the rich gloss and the silky fineness to make it resemble that of the lost Bertram. His features, somewhat largely chiselled, were haughtily handsome, yet with the traces of either fatigue or dissipation in his lineaments. But altogether there was a sufficiency—more than a sufficiency of a family likeness to bring back the image of Bertram most vividly to her mind—even if at the moment any such impulse should have been wanting at all. Nevertheless, Eliza's self-possession remained: the astonishment which she experienced at her own fortitude, amounted almost to a feeling of gladness; and thus was it with a smile and with all her habitual sweetness of manner, that she gave Hugh her hand, welcoming him to Oaklands.

Lord Clandon's demeanour was alike respectful and friendly—or it might be termed delicately courteous—towards her whom, though three years younger than himself, marriage had made his aunt. The Duke and Sir William Lomax remained chatting with them for a few minutes; and then the former, taking the Baronet's arm, sauntered away to another part of the room, for the purpose of leaving his wife and nephew to get over the first restraints and awkwardness of an introduction and become better acquainted with each other. Eliza resumed her seat: Lord Clandon, with fashionable ease, sank upon a chair near her, and at once began to converse on the current topics of the day. He spoke of the Italian Opera—of the last new novel—of a drama which had made "a great hit"—and of two or three approaching "marriages in high life." Then he spoke of his travels in foreign parts; and he related several adventures which had befallen him—but in a pleasing manner, and without any offensive egotism. He was evidently a man of the world—well accustomed to all the usages of the sphere in which he moved; and by his discourse, the impression was conveyed that he had a great deal of frankness and high-mindedness in his disposition. Such was the opinion Eliza formed of him; and indeed it was all the more natural she should do so—not merely because there was no appearance on his part of a studied straining to make that impression—but likewise because he spoke in the kindest and most dutiful terms of his uncle,—at the same time treating the Duchess herself with a courtesy which had all the friendliness proper to subsist between relatives, and all the respect which so young a man was bound in delicacy to show towards the still more youthful bride of an elderly relation.

Presently Lord Clandon was introduced to Captain Lacey; and when the latter, after some little conversation, had retired to the card-room, to form one at a rubber of whist,—Lord Clandon said to Eliza, "Is it possible that you ever resided at Oxford?"

The Duchess had for the previous half-hour been prepared for some such question as this; and it was therefore without any visible trepidation that she replied in the affirmative. But she said no more; and no inquiring look was thrown upon Hugh, to seek the motive of the question.

"It struck me," continued Lord Clandon, "when I read the account of your marriage in the newspaper—I was then in Paris, by the bye—that the name of Captain Lacey, who was mentioned as your Grace's father, was not altogether unfamiliar to me; and the moment your venerable parent was just now introduced to me, I felt persuaded I had seen him before. Yes—I recollect—he was once pointed out to me at Oxford——But perhaps your Grace is unaware that I myself passed a couple of years in that city? Indeed, I am afraid," he added with a smile, "that we collegians were not considered steady enough for reception into private families."

Eliza slowly turned her looks upon Lord Clandon to assure herself whether there was any hidden meaning in his remark—any pointed allusion to the *one* exception which had been made in favour of his brother Bertram with regard to a reception at Captain Lacey's house at Oxford: but she was convinced that he intended nothing, and that it was merely in a conversational manner he had thus spoken.

"Yes," said Eliza, in answer to a question which he had put: "I was aware that you were at Oxford."

"It is somewhat singular," Hugh went on to observe, "that we should have been in the same town a comparatively short while back, yet such total strangers to each other—and now that we should meet—for me," he added, with a smile and a gentle inclination of the head, "to have the honour of addressing your Grace as a relation. Let me see? it was two years last June since I and my brother Bertram left Oxford. I can assure you I was by no means sorry: I was getting heartily tired of the same kind of life, though it was all pleasure. But then pleasures pall upon the senses," he added, with the languid tone and the jaded look of a man who had drunk to satiety of that cup of pleasure whereof he spoke. "As for Bertram, I don't know how it was, but he was wretched to a degree at leaving College. Perhaps he was not quite so wild as I was, and had rather a fancy for his studies. Don't think the worse of me because I now confess that little wildness on my part. When it is gone and past, one may talk of it. Bertram was more sentimental and serious than I——"

At this moment the Duchess dropped her handkerchief, which Lord Clandon hastened to pick up for her. It had fallen from her hand, as a faintness coming over her, made her fair fingers relax their hold upon it. Within the last few minutes the name of Bertram had been mentioned half-a-dozen times in her hearing: it would have been sufficient for this mere mention to agitate her profoundly; but when she heard the name—that sacred, loved, lamented name—thrown forth from the lips with what appeared to be the mingled levity and callousness of one who, although his brother, could yet speak of him as if the recollection of his loss were unaccompanied with a single regret, it was sufficient to overwhelm all Eliza's fortitude in a moment and make her sink down beneath the influence of her excruciated feelings. Again however did a species of preterhuman self-possession come to her aid: the little incident of the handkerchief startled her into a vivid consciousness of the peculiarities and perils of her

position—and her countenance was serene once more.

. Lord Clandon was already continuing the same topic, when Sir William Lomax advanced with his wonted stiff stateliness of manner, and with his eyes half closed; for he thought that this appearance gave him an air of intellectual consequence;—and joining in the conversation, he turned it upon another topic. But all of a sudden the door opened somewhat hastily,—hastily enough to startle the inmates of the room, and to stop the music which a piano was sending forth beneath the fingers of a young lady. It was Mrs. Bailey who made her appearance; and hastening up to the Duchess, with a look of ill-subdued agitation, she said, "Do not be frightened—pray do not be frightened! We hope it is nothing: but your Grace's father——"

"My father?" echoed Eliza, starting up to her feet in sudden terror.

"Pray do not be frightened! It is but a slight fit—and fortunately Dr. Rodney being one of the guests——"

The Duchess waited to hear no more: she rushed wildly from the room, and in a few moments knew the worst. Captain Lacey, while seated at the card-table, had been stricken down by paralysis, which had deprived him of consciousness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CONTENTS OF THE DESK.

How uncertain are the affairs of this life! The mutations from weal to woe are as often of lightning rapidity as of gradual stealthy movement; and swift as the changes of the magic lantern, may the scene shift from the brilliantly-lighted saloon where music fills the perfumed atmosphere, to the chamber of death where the sounds of weeping prevail. Thus was it at the ducal mansion of Oaklands. At the very instant that soft melody was flowing upon the ears in one apartment, and cards were being played in another,—the sable wing of the Destroyer was unfolding itself above that high antique roof: the music was to cease suddenly in consternation—the victim's last card was played!

It was long past the hour of midnight. Captain Lacey was stretched in a sumptuous couch, plunged in that last sleep which paralysis often brings, and from which there is to be no awaking in this world. Eliza knelt by the side of that couch, with her father's hand pressed to her lips. She was weeping—not loudly and bitterly—but in that low continuous manner which perhaps indicates a deeper and more concentrated anguish of the soul. The Duke stood near her; and frequently did he bend down to whisper a few lowly-uttered but tender and earnest words in her ear, imparting such solace as in existing circumstances could be given. Dr. Rodney was near the head of the bed, watching with an ominous countenance the evidences of the soul's approaching transition from its mortal tenement into the regions of immortality. The old housekeeper—summoned to officiate as a nurse, though the patient was indeed well nigh beyond all human ministrations—was likewise there. Every possible assistance had been rendered—every available means adopted to grapple with the Destroyer's power—but vainly and ineffectually: Eliza's father was on his death-bed. As the gray dawn of morning glimmered in through the casements and made the wax-lights burn pale, the spirit passed out of the form which for several hours had remained in slumbering unconsciousness.

The Duke led his deeply afflicted wife away from the chamber, and besought her to seek rest in her own boudoir. Even in the midst of her acute anguish—her profound sorrow—she could not help being smitten with a sense of her husband's considerate kindness towards her; and for the first time perhaps since the marriage ring was placed upon her finger, she pressed his hand with a sincerely felt warmth. We will not linger upon this scene. The reader who already comprehends the tenderness of Eliza's heart, and the full extent of her devoted attachment towards her father, can picture to himself the immensity of the sorrow which her soul experienced. The funeral took place; and the remains of Captain Lacey were consigned to a vault in the village church of Oaklands, about a mile distant from the ducal mansion. Thus how soon did the gloom of a funeral succeed to the gaiety of a wedding! how soon did mourning garments clothe the exquisitely fair form which had lately been arrayed in a bridal dress!

Captain Lacey had brought his writing-desk in his portmanteau to Oaklands. The Duke, through kindest consideration for his beloved Duchess, caused every article belonging to her deceased father to be carefully put out of sight—save and except that writing-desk, which he thought might possibly contain papers—perhaps a will: for his Grace was not altogether acquainted with his departed father-in-law's pecuniary circumstances. At all events he considered that whatever there might be in the desk, it was the sacred duty of Eliza *alone* to open it. Therefore, at the expiration of about a month after the funeral—when the first bitterness of anguish had passed, and the mind of the bereaved daughter was becoming subdued down into the serenity of a holy and pious resignation—the Duke one day took that desk into her boudoir, presented her with the key, which had been found in the deceased's garments, and imprinting a kiss upon her cheek, left her to the fulfilment of a sad but necessary task. Eliza recognised her father's desk in a moment; and again in the conduct of her husband did she perceive much delicate consideration, which her heart—though it could not love—was yet enabled to appreciate. The sight of that desk brought tears to her eyes; and thus weeping before she opened it, she was in a measure relieved, as well as strengthened to address herself to that duty.

She opened the desk. The first paper she took out, was a tress of her mother's hair—that mother who had died in giving her birth, and whom she had never known. She pressed it to her lips: again she wept—and wiping away her tears, proceeded with her task. The next paper she drew forth, was addressed to Captain Lacey, in the well-known hand of Bertram; and she knew the letter likewise. It was the one which he had written from Oaklands, bowing to the decision of Eliza's father that two years were to elapse ere their cor-

ELIZA, DUCHESS OF MARCHMONT.

respondence should be renewed. She had never seen this letter since the day it arrived—she had never read it but once; yet she now recognised it in a moment—and every line of its contents was imprinted on her memory as if seared there with red hot iron. Her first impulse was to open and read it again—but she checked herself: the very thought struck her as being an infidelity to her husband. She could not prevent herself from thinking of Bertram—she could not prevent her mind from clinging with a soft, sad, serene affection to his image: she had no power over her own volition. But on the other hand, she felt that she had no right to do a positive deed which might resuscitate all the frenzy of her regrets for his loss: she had no right to voluntarily seek for the evidences of that love which heaven had refused to crown with happiness. Therefore, under the influence of this most scrupulous delicacy, Eliza put the letter aside; and again cast her looks into the writing-desk.

But, Ah! wherefore does she start? What writing is this which next meets her eye? what letter is that which, addressed to her father, she eagerly, greedily, almost frantically snatches up? She examines the direction—she looks at the post-marks—a faintness comes over her: the letter drops from her hand. She snatches it up again: and again she scrutinizes the post-marks. Thoughts of strange and wild contexture sweep through her mind,—fancies so poignant, so bewildering, so fraught with a solemn wonderment and at the same time a fearful suspense, that they are almost overpowering. A single glance at the interior of that letter would clear up all doubt—relieve her of all suspense: and she knows—she feels—she has the conviction that it will do so: but there is within her a shuddering awful horror to arrive at that certainty. Thoughts so wild—apparently so impossible—are agitating in her brain: and yet what she thinks of, *is* possible—for the proof is there: she holds it in her hand! There is within her the certainty that it is so; and yet she flutters, and trembles, and quivers with all the doubt of agonizing suspense. This state is intolerable. She opens the letter—she reads—but only a few words, and for a few moments; and she sinks down upon her knees with a low, deep, long-drawn, gasping moan, the full meaning of which it would be almost impossible to describe.

Her head is bowed upon the chair from which she has sunk down: her face is buried in her hands—and that boudoir is silent as the grave: not even the pulsations of her heart nor the respirations of her breath are audible. She is motionless as the sculptured effigy of Despair kneeling by a monument of a loved and lost one. Yet it is not that she is in a state of unconsciousness. No: her sense remains—but experienced only as a stunned, dismayed consternation. There is something awful—something profoundly solemn—in the mental condition of that kneeling lady. She weeps not—her bosom is not convulsed: there is not a tremor thrilling through her form—not even the slightest creeping agitation to give sign of life. Yet she lives: but her's are unutterable, ineffable feelings.

Minutes elapse while she thus remains kneeling by the chair, her face buried in her hands. At length slowly—Oh! so slowly, she rises up like a ghost ascending from the tomb; and as a ghost she is marble pale. If she caught the reflection of her own image in the mirror opposite, she would start in dismay: she would not believe, in the first shock, that it was herself she beheld imaged there. But she has no outward vision for anything: her eyes behold nothing in the room. All her thoughts—all her senses—all her faculties, are absorbed in *one* idea which lies at the bottom of her soul.

Again several minutes elapse; and then with a slow mechanical movement, as if unconscious of the very impulse which she is obeying, Eliza stoops down and picks up the letter which has fallen from her hand—that letter which has produced all which we have just been describing. And now she sits down, and reads it calmly and deliberately. Oh, with what a calmness! It is the calmness which the ocean of hyperborean regions displays when frozen into solid ice,—the calmness of that glacial spell which can alone tranquillize the mighty waters that if the talismanic power were removed, would boil and rage in all the wild ebullition of the tempest. It is the calmness of the volcano that sleeps under a power superior to its own, when its lava is hardened into petrifaction—but which, if the spell should be removed, and a spark should be set to the inflammable concrete, would pour forth the gush of the burning levin.

Eliza read the letter mechanically—deliberately—from the first word to the last. It was finished; and then only did she display any outward emotion: then only was it that a strange expression—a sad expression indeed to be seen upon the countenance of one so young and beautiful—passed slowly over her features, while simultaneously a glacial tremor trailed itself as slowly through her entire form.

"I thank thee, O God, for one thing," she said, in a voice which seemed as if borne upon a breath of ice,—"and only for *one* thing. The rest is all dark—horrible—frightful—incredible!"

It did not seem to strike her that she had given utterance to something savouring of impious blasphemy, in accepting only *one* of the many dispensations of Providence on which her thoughts were evidently fixed. But she was in that state when the human soul is so chilled by despair, that the form to which it belongs is but a breathing, animated marble statue.

She looked over the remaining papers in the desk: there was another letter, in the same handwriting—of a recent date—a *very* recent date—and this also Eliza read. Again were her feelings excited poignantly—horribly—agonizingly; and for some minutes she was convulsed with the tortures of anguish, while the tears rained down her cheeks. She wrung her hands too—yes, wrung them bitterly, bitterly;—and it was long ere she recovered even the calmness of despair. Then she again looked into the desk: but there was nothing more to interest her. Impossible indeed would it have been for any other paper to produce a state of being more deplorable—more deserving the whole world's commiseration—than those which had already placed a petrifying spell upon the heart of the unhappy Duchess of Marchmont. She locked up all the papers in the desk again; and the desk itself she secured in a bureau of which she kept the key. For

the remainder of that day she stayed in her boudoir,—sending a message by one of her maids to her husband, to the effect that she begged his kind consideration and wished to be alone. The Duke naturally fancied—as indeed was but too terribly the case—that his wife had found in the contents of the desk something to make her thus court solitude; and he obtruded not his presence upon her. But on the following morning, when she descended to the breakfast-parlour, she expressed her gratitude for all his goodness towards her; and when he saw how pale she was, he thought to himself that the documents she had found in the desk, must have revived all her bitterest affliction at her father's loss. He however delicately and carefully abstained from breathing a word in allusion to the subject—much less to inquire what the contents of those papers might have been. From that day forth the sadness deepened upon Eliza's countenance—but also blended with a sweeter and holier resignation: her tones acquired that soft plaintiveness of harmony which characterizes the voice that is accustomed to keep down an ebullition of feeling: her cheeks remained pale—but not with a sickly whiteness: it was the perfect transparency of the complexion which loses not its animation when the tint of the rose dies away.

We should observe that Lord Clandon had left Oaklands almost immediately after Captain Lacey's funeral—as did also Mrs. Bailey: the other guests who had been invited to stay there, had for delicacy's sake taken their leave on the very morning after the demise of the Duchess's father. The Duke of Marchmont,—thinking that change of scene would contribute to the restoration of his wife's spirits, and that a southern clime during the approaching winter would benefit her health,—proposed a visit to Italy. Eliza, ever amiably ready to yield to her husband's wishes in all things, gave her assent in that calmly serene manner, tinged with sadness, which had now become habitual to her:—and to Italy they accordingly went.

The winter passed: spring revisited the earth, clothing the trees with a tender verdure, and covering the boughs with blossoms. Summer followed, to expand that verdure into a more brilliant green, and to prepare the boughs for the rich fruitage of autumn. It was in the beginning of September, 1829—exactly one year from the death of Captain Lacey—that the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont returned to Oaklands. The Duke had some reason to flatter himself that his hopes, when they set out upon their travels, had not been altogether unfulfilled. It was not that the colour had come back to Eliza's cheeks—*that* appeared to have gone for ever: but as there was naught of insipid deadness in the purity of her complexion, her beauty was not marred—only rendered the more interesting. There are some forms which remain uninfluenced by the sorrow which lies deep in the heart: it is ever so when that sorrow exists always the same,—breaking not forth in sudden and violent ebullitions, to be succeeded by periods of exhaustion. These cause the wear and tear of the frame: but it is the former state which shows itself but little outwardly;—and so it was with the Duchess of Marchmont. Her figure retained all its rounded contours, its rich proportions, its flowing outlines: splendour, elegance, and grace, blended with a touching interest as well as with a becoming dignity, rendered her a being of whom any husband might be proud. And the Duke of Marchmont was proud of his Eliza: he had seen her as much admired in Italy as she had been in England; and he now hoped that as England was reached again, she would mingle in the society which her rank and loveliness qualified her to adorn, and where she would shine as a star of matchless and sweetest beauty.

The Duke of Marchmont's arrangements were that they should remain at Oaklands throughout the autumn, until the Christmas season,—when they would remove to the town-mansion. His Grace was accustomed to submit to his wife's approval whatsoever he projected: for to *her* only was he neither proud nor autocratic;—and she on her side invariably gave her sweetly and softly expressed assent to all his proposals. But in order that the stay at Oaklands might not be dull nor monotonous,—and in order that Eliza might again gradually glide into the gaieties of society, after a year of mourning for her father,—the Duke suggested that they should entertain a select circle of friends. Accordingly invitations were sent to Mrs. Bailey, to the Lomax family, and to half-a-dozen other members, male and female, of the fashionable world. They came in due course; and though Eliza received them with her wonted affability, and did the honours of the mansion with a becoming grace and dignity, she experienced no real relief in their society from any of the sorrows that lay deep in the immortal caverns of her heart.

Lord Clandon was at his shooting-box in a midland county, when the Duke and Duchess returned to England. On learning their arrival, he lost no time in writing a dutiful and affectionate letter to his uncle, expressing a hope that the amiable Duchess had recovered so far as could be expected from the shock of her father's death. The Duke, flattered and gratified by this fresh testimonial of Hugh's complete and generous deference to the head of the family, responded in cordial terms, and invited him to pay a visit to Oaklands. Lord Clandon was unmarried; and the Duke jocosely hinted in his letter that it was high time Hugh should think of taking unto himself a partner for life—and that probably amongst the lady-guests assembled at Oaklands, he might find one who in personal and pecuniary points of view would prove an eligible match. The pecuniary point of view was perhaps the more important for Lord Clandon's consideration, inasmuch as he was far from rich: his income amounted to a bare two thousand a-year—little enough to support his position as a Peer—and a mere trifle indeed for one whose habits were expensive and extravagant. The Duke well knew that his nephew was thus straitened in his means; and in the same letter which conveyed the invitation to Oaklands, he enclosed a cheque upon his banker for a handsome amount. Lord Clandon hastened to acknowledge the epistle and its enclosure,—expressing a fervid gratitude for his uncle's considerate kindness, and promising to be at Oaklands at the expiration of a week.

The same post which brought this letter from Hugh, brought one from *another* quarter—likewise

addressed to the Duke. To this second letter a kind response was likewise returned by his Grace, —accompanied by an invitation to Oaklands. And Eliza knew that this letter was received—and that this invitation was given. The answer came, to the effect that the writer would be at Oaklands in the afternoon of the following day.

That afternoon came. The Duke and his wife were alone together in the drawing-room: for it so happened that all the guests were out riding or walking in the grounds, enjoying the beauty of that autumnal season. A very close observer—if such a one had been present—might have noticed that the cheeks of the Duchess were paler than even their wont,—paler because that animation of the complexion which had survived the fading of the natural carnation tint, was temporarily deadened into a complete whiteness. And such an observer, too, would perchance have seen that there was a strange light in the large dark eyes. The Duke however perceived not all this: for Eliza seemed busily occupied in the contemplation of a number of magnificent prints which one of the guests had brought from London a day or two previously. The Duke was standing in one of the bay-windows of the drawing-room, which commanded a view of the carriage-road; for he was in expectation of the promised arrival.

It was about four o'clock on this particular afternoon, that a post-chaise dashed up to the grand entrance of Oaklands; and the Duke exclaimed, "Here he is! More than three years have elapsed since last I saw him."

Eliza remained occupied with the prints—but turning them over more rapidly than at first. The Duke went on making observations relative to the individual who had just arrived—but it scarcely seemed as if the Duchess heard them: for she gave no response. In a few minutes footsteps were heard approaching the door: that door was thrown open—and a domestic announced, "The Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian."

CHAPTER V.

BERTRAM VIVIAN.

Eliza rose from her seat; and the Duke took her hand to present her to her relative,—that relative whom he fancied she had never in her life seen before—but alas! whom she had known so well and loved so tenderly. She was white as a sheet; and her death-like pallor was rendered all the more visible by the half-mourning garb that she wore. Her raven hair, arranged in massive bands, threw out as it were the colourless countenance in its purest marble relief: her lips were of the hue of ashes: but there was a strange light glistening in her eyes, as she bowed to Bertram Vivian. Then there was a quick revulsion of feeling within her, —pangs of ineffable anguish shooting in rapid succession through her heart; and while her fortitude was sufficient to prevent any outburst of that woe —any ebullition of that harrowing agony—it had the effect on the other hand of sending up the hectic hues of excitement to her cheeks; so that her husband, as he glanced with proud satisfaction upon his young wife, while introducing her to Bertram, thought that she had never seemed so beautiful before.

And Bertram Vivian himself—how looked, how felt he? He was now in his twenty-fourth year—a young man of Apollo-like beauty. His hair clustered in raven curls of exceeding richness about that high marble forehead where Genius sat enthroned: his tall slender figure was masculine symmetry itself. But he too was deadly pale: yet to the Duke's eye was no agitation on his part visible. But how different to the eyes of Eliza! The glance—the one glance—which she had dared throw upon him, made her aware in an instant that he was a prey to a deep, silent, inward agitation, as tremendous and as excruciating as that which she felt herself: and she saw too that notwithstanding his air of outward composure, there was something about him almost bordering upon terror which her eye alone could detect. Doubtless he feared lest all in a moment the adamantine bonds of tensely nerved prudence and preterhuman self-control wherewith he and she had fortified themselves, should be snapped asunder, as Samson broke the Philistine bonds—and that there might ensue a wild scene of agony, flooding tears, and convulsive sobs, in which they would both be lost. But when Bertram beheld her so completely the mistress of herself, that feeling of terror passed away in an instant; and with a coldly courteous dignity, he returned her salutation.

"Bertram, my dear nephew," exclaimed the Duke, hastening to embrace him; "welcome to Oaklands! Welcome—doubly welcome—all the more that I have not seen you since that shocking but false report of your loss———But, Eliza dearest, you must at least give my younger nephew as kind a greeting as you bestowed upon the elder one when first you met a year back."

For the Duke remembered that when Eliza and Lord Clandon had thus met, she graciously proffered him her hand, giving him at the same time words of welcome. But now to Bertram no hand was stretched forth—no syllable was spoken.

"Welcome to Oaklands, Mr. Vivian," said Eliza, in a voice which *he* knew to be unnaturally calm, but which struck the Duke as only being strangely and unaccountably chilling: at the same time she proffered her hand, which Bertram just held for a moment.

Again had a revulsion of feeling taken place within her: she was again all marble—and it was a hand cold as that of the dead which Bertram thus touched.

"And so, my dear nephew," said the Duke, "you only returned from St. Petersburgh a few days back? By the bye, how was it that when you came from the United States last June twelvemonth, you did not take London in your way to see your relatives and your friends, ere proceeding to St. Petersburgh?"

"You are aware, uncle," responded Bertram, "that when I obtained leave of absence from my post in America, it *was* my purpose to pass a few months in England. But on arriving at Liverpool I received an official despatch, announcing that I was appointed First Attaché to the Embassy at St. Petersburgh; and the positive orders were that I was to proceed thither without a moment's delay. I did so."

"Well, well," said the Duke, "there is nothing

like zeal and obedience in the performance of your duties. The Foreign Office is much pleased with you; and I shall ask that you be appointed Envoy to one of the minor Courts. It is a proud thing for you, Bertram, to reflect that when only a few months past your twenty-third year, you will be an Ambassador! Or if you like to go to Parliament, I can put you in for one of my pocket-boroughs at the next general election."

"My lord, I would much rather leave England again as soon as possible."

"Well, we shall have plenty of time to talk it over: for I mean you to stay a few weeks with us, now that you are here. Your brother, Lord Clandon, is expected in a few days; and we have a select party at Oaklands."

"I should now wish to retire to my chamber," said Bertram. "The roads are dusty——"

"To be sure!" cried the Duke: and ringing the bell, he ordered the domestic who answered the summons, to show the Hon. Mr. Vivian to his apartment.

"And it is time," said Eliza, after a pause, during which Bertram with a slight bow had quitted the room,—"it is time that I should dress for dinner."

In a few minutes the Duchess was alone in her boudoir. This meeting with the loved one—the one who was still so dear to her—had been almost more than her fortitude could bear up against. Throughout the ordeal she herself was astounded at her own courage in supporting it: but now that she was alone in her boudoir, her feelings could no longer be restrained. She threw herself upon her knees—her anguish burst forth—the tears gushed in fountains from her eyes—her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"O father, father!" the voice of ineffable agony went up from her heart, as she thus apostrophized her dead parent: "you knew not the misery you were entailing upon me at the time! But if from the mansions of the other world it be given to the spirits of the departed to look down at what is passing in this, you can now understand it all! May God forgive you, father——even as I have forgiven you!"

When she grew somewhat calmer, the Duchess of Marchmont reviewed the details of the meeting which had just passed. While Bertram was answering his uncle's observations, he had spoken with a cold firmness, and without even so much as glancing towards herself: but when he had said that he was anxious to leave England as soon as possible, he had spoken with an emphasis which she could full well understand. Oh, why had he come to Oaklands at all? wherefore cause them both to run this tremendous risk? Did he suppose that the Duke was acquainted with the circumstance of their love? No—it was impossible: for if so, Bertram would not have paid this visit. The natural delicacy of his feelings would have kept him away:—but how was it that his pride had not also kept him away? Did he suspect how she had been deceived and sacrificed? or did he fancy that she had wilfully proved faithless to her love for him, and dazzled by the proffer of a ducal coronet, had bestowed her hand upon his uncle? In all these matters Eliza was in a state of the utmost uncertainty. But could her doubts be cleared up? must she seek or afford an opportunity for explanations? No—she was resolved not to trust herself alone with Bertram Vivian. Rather—ten thousand times rather, exist even under the weight of *his* injurious suspicions, if such he entertained,—than do aught which might savour of impropriety in her position as a wife, or lead her to even an unfaithful thought or unduteous word with regard to her husband. And that he *did* entertain those suspicions, she was more than half afraid: for there was a certain pride—a certain cold assertion of manly dignity, in the way in which he had met her. Why then had he come to Oaklands?—was it to upbraid and reproach her? was it to demand the return of the ring which he had given her, and to restore the one which he had received from herself?

The Duchess of Marchmont saw more than ever the necessity of exerting all her fortitude. She did her best to assume her wonted outward calmness; and she bathed her eyes copiously to efface the evidences of weeping ere she summoned her maids to assist at her toilet. When this toilet was completed, she repaired to the drawing-room, where she found the Duke in conversation with the assembled guests: but Bertram was not there. It was not until within a few minutes of the dinner-hour, that he made his appearance. How handsome did he look!—but not finely and majestically handsome—it was rather a delicate and intellectual but still masculine beauty which characterized him. There was no colour upon his cheeks; and his glossy dark whiskers threw out the paleness of those cheeks all the more visibly. But the exquisite classic profile—the haughty curl of the upper lip—and the god-like nobility of the alabaster brow, with the raven curls clustering around it,—rendered that head a model of sculptural perfection. His movements were slow, yet not sluggish: they were replete with ease and elegance: but they, as well as the expression of his countenance, indicated to observers generally the thoughtfulness of his mind—and to Eliza *alone* the existence of a deep, ineffable, imperishable sorrow in his heart. His voice was, as it were, clouded from the same cause—but full of a fine masculine harmony; and when, as he glided with ease into the discourse that was progressing as he entered, a smile appeared upon his lips, it was a cold glacial smile, resembling the light which the sun flings upon ice.

When dinner was announced, it became Bertram's duty,—as the last male comer, and likewise as a relative—to escort the Duchess to the banqueting-room. It was only with a cold courtesy that he approached her: with the same cold reserve did she bow slightly as she took his arm: but not with more airy lightness sits the butterfly upon the flower, than lay the fingers of Eliza upon the arm of Bertram Vivian. As they headed the procession to the banqueting-room, Bertram spoke of the weather, of the beauty of the grounds, and of the most indifferent topics. It was the same as he sat on her right hand at the dinner-table; and when he took wine with her, the bows that were exchanged were the merest and the slightest inclination of the head, without a smile upon either countenance. All was chilling and distant between them. Thus the dinner passed away; and every one, not even excepting the Duke himself, had noticed that there was a strange formal

reserve—a chilling ceremonial distance, with merely the gloss of well-bred courtesy over all—between the Duchess and Bertram Vivian. But of course no remark was verbally made; though covert and stealthy looks of surprise were exchanged. The natural impression was that Bertram—less generous, less magnanimous than his elder brother—looked with ill-disguised discontent and annoyance on the marriage which his uncle had contracted; and that the Duchess, perceiving this conduct on his part, resented it in a dignified and becoming manner.

When the ladies had retired, the Duke—not wishing to judge his nephew hastily, but at the same time feeling it incumbent upon him to take some little notice, if only by barest allusion, of a tenour of conduct which every one had perceived—motioned him to bring his glass and come and sit next to him. Bertram obeyed with an alacrity which, trifling though the incident were, displayed a most willing obedience; and scarcely was he seated by the Duke's side, when he said in an earnest manner, "Accept my sincerest thanks, dear uncle, for the handsome addition you have so continuously made to my own restricted income. I have endeavoured to render myself worthy of your generosity. And now, scarcely am I beneath your roof, when you make me offers of which any young man ought to be proud. I never *will*—I never *can* forget your goodness! God forbid that I ever should!"—and it was with the sudden impulsiveness of a naturally fervid nature, that Bertram took his uncle's hand and pressed it warmly in his own.

The Duke for an instant gazed upon him in wonderment, as he said to himself, "Is it possible that Bertram is a vile hypocrite—that in his heart he detests my marriage—that he is not altogether able to conceal his sentiments from my wife—but that fearing he has gone too far, he now seeks to propitiate and conciliate me?"

Yet there was nothing in the young man's countenance—nothing in the honest frankness with which his dark clear eyes encountered his uncle's looks—to justify those suspicions. The Duke was bewildered; and Bertram went on speaking.

"You asked me," he said, "if I would like to enter Parliament?—but I have no wish to remain in England. English habits and tastes do not suit one who has been upwards of three years abroad. Besides," added Bertram quickly, "my views are entirely cast in the diplomatic sphere; and therein, dear uncle, do I solicit your interest. Believe me, I am in haste to get abroad again—no matter to what part of the world! I deemed it my bounden duty to come to Oaklands to pay my respects to you—to assure your Grace of my gratitude—and to congratulate you on the happiness which you evidently enjoy."

"Yes—I *am* happy with my amiable Duchess," responded the Duke: and once more were his eyes fixed earnestly and scrutinizingly upon Bertram Vivian.

"Report had not failed to waft her manifold good qualities to my ears," he observed, without the slightest change of countenance, "even before I had the honour of meeting her Grace this day."

"And yet methinks, Bertram," said the Duke, "you hardly treated her with the friendliness of a relative."

The young man gave no immediate answer: he dropped his kerchief, and deliberately picked it up. This interval of a single moment was sufficient for him to recover complete self-possession.

"Rest assured, uncle," responded Bertram, "that my conduct shall ever be marked with the profoundest respect towards the Duchess of Marchmont——yes, *ever!*"

The Duke bit his lip for a moment. He thought there was something cold and distant in the answer—something which justified his suspicion that Bertram in his heart hated the match. But yet it was not a reply which would bear any comment on his Grace's part. It might even admit an interpretation which would throw out the delicacy of his nephew's feelings in the most admirable light. What if he considered that respect was the only, or at least the most becoming demeanour which he ought to adopt towards a lady a year younger than himself, and who had merely become connected with him by marriage with a relative?—what if he were to consider that anything savouring of a more advanced cordiality might touch upon familiarity, and that such familiarity might be viewed suspiciously by the world? And then too, Bertram had really so little to gain if the Duke had remained unmarried and if he were to die childless. The elder brother Lord Clandon would become Duke of Marchmont—he would no doubt marry—he would probably have issue—and Bertram Vivian would gain the empty title of a lord by courtesy, without a Peer's rank, and without a single additional farthing to his income.

All these thoughts swept through the mind of the Duke of Marchmont in the space of a few moments; and when he again turned his eyes upon Bertram Vivian, there was so much open-hearted frankness, so much lofty intellectuality, so much true grandeur of the soul depicted upon his faultlessly beautiful countenance, that the Duke felt he must have wronged him with his unfavourable suspicions,—while on the other hand, his favourable conjectures to account for his nephew's conduct towards the Duchess, must after all be the right ones. The gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, where coffee was served round. Bertram leant against the mantel-piece, at a distance from all the rest,—at intervals silent and abstracted—at others falling with well-bred readiness and intellectual ease into the conversation that was going on. He did not once approach the Duchess—he never addressed his observations to her: but then no one could consider this as extraordinary, inasmuch as his remarks were made generally, and not in reply to the previous observations of any particular individual. Still there was a visible restraint on the part of both Bertram and the Duchess: for she never once even so much as turned her eyes upon him; and she also had her intervals of silence and abstraction, which never were perceived before. The guests separated to their respective chambers with the conviction that Bertram hated the marriage, and that the Duchess fathomed his feeling and properly resented it in the way that a well-bred lady could alone exhibit her offended and indignant pride. The Duke of Marchmont, too, again wavered in his opinion, and was again inclined to think that this was the true reading of the mystery. He therefore said nothing to Eliza

on the subject, for fear of wounding her feelings: but he secretly resolved that if these scenes were renewed, Bertram's visit to Oaklands should be cut very speedily short.

On the following morning, at breakfast, there was the same cold restraint—the same distant formality, between the Duchess and Bertram Vivian. When the amusements of the day were about to be settled, the Duchess proposed a riding-party amongst other recreations: whereupon Bertram, on being invited by the Duke to join it, excused himself on the plea of having letters to write. In the afternoon, when there was to be a boating party on the splendid piece of ornamental water in the neighbourhood of the mansion, Bertram begged to be excused from joining it, as his physician had recommended horse-exercise and he could not dispense with his daily ride. The guests were astonished. He would not ride when they rode; but he now chose to ride when they did not. The dinner was marked by the same sort of conduct: the evening passed in a similar manner; and the effect of all this was to throw a species of damp upon the spirits of the guests. The Duke himself now became cold and distant to Bertram; and not choosing to deign any farther discourse with him on the topic, resolved to speak to his wife.

"Eliza," he said, when they had retired to their chamber, "it is impossible I can conceal from myself the strange—I may even call it the rude and uncourteous manner in which my nephew behaves towards you."

For a moment the Duchess trembled from head to foot: but her agitation escaped her husband's notice. Then, almost instantaneously recovering her presence of mind, she said in her serene calm voice, "I have nothing to complain of in Mr. Vivian's treatment."

Again was the Duke smitten with the thought that his favourable construction must be the true one—that Bertram was resolved his conduct should be merely respectful, and nothing more—that Eliza understood his meaning, appreciated it, and was not merely satisfied, but pleased. The Duke therefore said no more: but he thought within his own heart that this self-imposed restraint would necessarily be mitigated into a little more genial cordiality in the course of a few days.

The next three or four days, however, passed in precisely the same manner; and it became evident that Bertram absolutely avoided the Duchess as much as he possibly could. If when in the drawing-room, a movement was made by the guests which threatened to leave him alone with Eliza, he would abruptly quit the apartment. He had ceased to conduct her to the dinner-table: he placed himself (and some thought, studiously so) as far from her as possible. He never addressed himself direct to her, unless absolutely obliged; and then his tones were chillingly glacial. *Her* demeanour on the other hand began to grow evidently distressed, notwithstanding all her efforts to maintain a dignified composure. The truth is, it was an ordeal that was wearing her out: she could not support it. All her love for Bertram Vivian was revived with its full pristine power and tenderness. Indeed, it had never been extinguished: it had given place to resignation when she believed him to be no more—it had remained as it were lulled and subdued by the strong dominion of self-control during the year which had elapsed since, by the contents of her father's desk, she had discovered that he was alive—and when Bertram himself, in all his living, breathing beauty, again appeared in her presence, that love was inspired with fullest vitality once more. To be with him—to behold him often and often when all the rest thought that her eyes gazed elsewhere—to breathe the same atmosphere—to hear the melting music of his voice, at times pouring forth its eloquence as if in golden tones—to know that she might have been *his* after all, if no duplicity and deceit had sacrificed her—and what was more still, to have the inward conviction that he loved her even now as much as ever he had loved before,—Oh! all this constituted an ordeal fraught with anguish that was ineffable, with tortures that were harrowing, with an affliction the poignancy of which was crucifying!

The Duke of Marchmont was bewildered. At one time he thought one thing—at another time another. Now his conjectures were favourable to his nephew: the next moment they became quite the reverse. He felt as if a scene were passing around him which he could not understand—as if there were some strange mystery to the reading of which he possessed no possible clue. That things could not go on thus, he felt persuaded: but how was he to interfere? how was he to treat with importance a matter which in reality might have no importance at all? If he made up his mind to speak to his nephew, Bertram at once took the initiative of the discourse, but quite on some other subject; and all his expressions were most dutiful and affectionate towards his uncle. Thus the Duke would go away from him, leaving unsaid all he had meant to say. If he spoke to his wife when they were alone together, Eliza still declared that there was nothing in Mr. Bertram's conduct of which she had to make the slightest complaint; and she even added in an unguarded moment, "that it was precisely what it ought to be." The Duke put quite a different construction on her words from that which they ought to have borne; and giving her credit for a delicacy of feeling which though carried to an extreme, was yet in the right direction, he embraced her with all his uxorious fondness.

It was in the midst of these circumstances that Lord Clandon arrived at Oaklands on the promised visit. The brothers had not met since they separated more than three years back at that very same mansion, after the death of the late Marquis of Viviandale—that death which by altering their father's position at the time, had led to their recall from college. Bertram precipitated himself into Hugh's arms; and if the joy of the latter were less exuberant, it was not considered the less sincere, but merely that it had a different mode of demonstration, the dispositions of the two being not completely alike. Lord Clandon was all cordial courtesy and respectful friendliness towards the Duchess: his demeanour appeared to be precisely what it ought from a relative of his age to one of her's. Thus the presence of Lord Clandon at Oaklands threw out, by the effect of contrast, the cold reserve and glacial formality of Bertram into still stronger relief.

Lord Clandon had not been half-an-hour on this

occasion at the mansion, before he observed his brother's conduct towards the Duchess. At first he himself was as much astonished as the rest: for he had not the remotest suspicion of anything that had taken place between Bertram and Eliza when she was Miss Lacey at Oxford. Neither did he conceive it possible that his brother loved the Duchess; for if so, Clandon thought that Bertram would pursue quite a different course and would seek to render himself as agreeable as possible. There was a mystery to be cleared up; and Hugh resolved to penetrate it. But how? He threw himself in Bertram's way—walked out alone with him—turned the conversation on the Duchess—and endeavoured to draw his brother out. But not the slightest syllable of explanation was volunteered. Lord Clandon accordingly saw that he must go upon some other tack. He watched his brother's and Eliza's demeanour towards each other for the next two days: still all was mystery. Then he bethought himself of a plan to arrive at its solution.

"My dear Mrs. Bailey," he said to this lady, one morning courteously offering her his arm to escort her for a walk through the grounds after breakfast,—"have you observed nothing?"

"Observed what, my lord?" inquired the antiquated votary of fashion: "that the eldest Miss Lomax's hair is red, though it passes in a complimentary way for auburn—that Miss Rachel Lomax has freckles—and that Miss Mary drank three glasses of champagne yesterday at dinner?"

"No—nothing of all that," answered Lord Clandon. "You are a relation of my amiable, beautiful, and accomplished young aunt——"

"To be sure I am!" said the old lady, proudly. "It was at my house, your lordship is aware, that his Grace first met Eliza and became enamoured of her."

"I know it," rejoined Clandon. "And being the Duchess's relation, you are of course in her confidence?"

"Ah, there you are wrong, my lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Bailey. "It is this which pains me. Eliza never consults me in anything. Even her very orders to her milliner are given without the least deference to my opinion; and though certainly everything becomes her——"

"Well then, my dear Mrs. Bailey," continued Hugh, "if you are not in her Grace's confidence, you ought to be. Yes—you ought to be," he added still more emphatically: "for there is something going on which no one can understand."

"It certainly struck me," said the old lady, "that the Hon. George Curzon is paying his addresses to Mary Lomax: but really I do not see that her Grace can interfere. Of course the young man's intentions are honourable——"

"My dear Mrs. Bailey," interrupted Lord Clandon, "it is not this that I mean. A lady of your shrewdness, experience, and penetration," he went on to say, in order to flatter the dame and win her over to his purpose,—"a lady of your tact and judgment——"

"I flatter myself that I am not deficient in all that," observed Mrs. Bailey, with a proud elevation of the head: "for I was the first to detect that the turtle-soup was burnt yesterday, and that there was no cayenne in the vermicelli."

"Then with such penetration, my dear Mrs. Bailey," quickly resumed his lordship, "you cannot possibly have failed to notice the extraordinary conduct of my brother Bertram towards the Duchess—and I might add, *her* equally extraordinary conduct towards *him*. I consult you as a relation of the Duchess—as her best and sincerest friend; and if there is anything to be done to bridge the gulf which evidently separates my brother from her Grace—if there be anything that can place them on a more cordial footing, pray make use of my services."

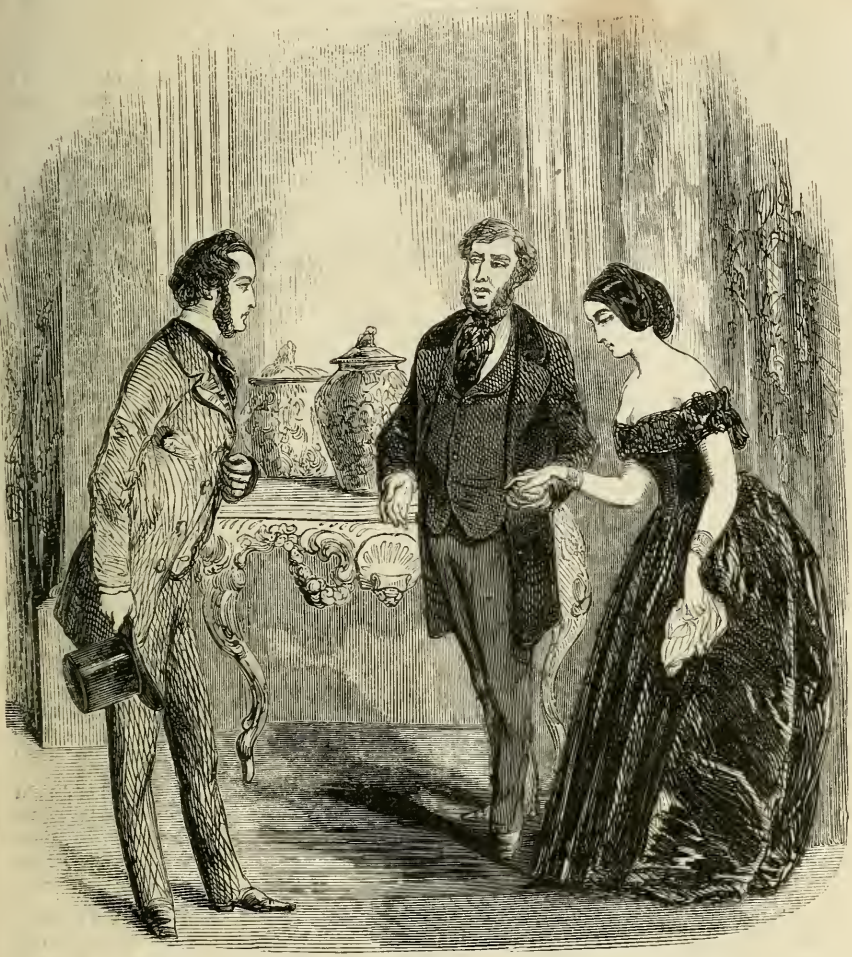
"Well, my lord," said Mrs. Bailey, delighted and flattered at being thought of so much importance as to be consulted in the matter, "there is something, you know—or rather you do *not* know: for it is a profound secret. The late Captain Lacey imparted it to me, strictly enjoining me however, not to divulge it. But as you have expressed yourself in such kind, such generous, such admirable terms, I think it would really be wrong for me not to take you into my confidence."

"My dear Mrs. Bailey, rest assured that I shall not abuse it;"—and Hugh spoke with the ill-repressed eagerness of one who hovers in suspense on the threshold of a mystery's solution.

"Well, I will trust you," said Mrs. Bailey, who was as frivolous as she was vain and selfish. "The fact is, Bertram and Eliza were acquainted at Oxford. They loved each other madly: they separated with an exchange of rings. I don't know whether they have them still: but I do recollect that Eliza wore her's very frequently up to the day of her marriage—but never since. Well, the report reached England of Bertram's death; and shortly afterwards Captain Lacey and his daughter removed to London to live with me. In due time the Captain received a letter from Bertram, expressing a hope that if the report of his death which was published in the English papers, had come to his knowledge, the contradiction had likewise been seen. This however had escaped the Captain's notice. Well, Eliza was beginning to be admired in my saloons; and though the Duke had not as yet seen her, there was every prospect of her forming some brilliant alliance. So I of course gave my advice on the subject: and of course Captain Lacey followed it. 'Bertram Vivian,' said I, 'is the mere cadet of a junior branch of a great family; and Eliza, with her beauty, can look much higher. Depend upon it, she will marry a peer of the realm. Keep this letter secret. Now that she is resigned to the belief of her lover's death, it is a pity to disturb that feeling. At all events, let her continue in ignorance of Bertram's miraculous escape until we see whether she cannot form a better match.'—Captain Lacey thought my counsel good, and adopted it."

"And therefore," observed Lord Clandon, "Eliza married the Duke in the belief that Bertram was no more?"

"Precisely so," answered Mrs. Bailey. "But I can assure you that for the last month or so, both her father and myself were dreadfully nervous and uneasy——I mean the last month previous to the wedding. For a *second* letter came from Bertram. It was addressed to the Captain at Oxford, as the former one was, and was sent on by the postmaster, with whom he had left an intimation whither his letters were to be forwarded."



"Yes—to be sure! quite prudent!" interjected Lord Clandon. "But that second letter——"

"It came to say that Bertram's love was as strong as ever," continued Mrs. Bailey,—"that the two years' test imposed by Captain Lacey had nearly expired—and that close upon the heels of the letter itself, Bertram was coming by the next ship to claim Eliza as his bride. Well, I certainly had some little difficulty in preventing the Captain from revealing everything to his daughter: but he was soon argued out of his foolishness—and so the match took place with the Duke, your uncle."

"And did you hear anything more of Bertram? did he call in Grosvenor Square when he visited England?" inquired Lord Clandon.

"No—nothing of the sort," answered Mrs. Bailey; "and I was very glad of it. Why should I have borne the brunt of his wild ravings? I suppose he saw the account of the marriage in the newspapers; and so the tale was told. It is very unfortunate he should have taken it into his head to come to Oaklands. For my part I think he had better have stayed away. However, it is impossible—considering all things—that he and the Duchess can behave to each other in a different way than what they do; and since he *has* chosen to come hither, I think their conduct is highly creditable to both. What I fear is that it may lead to some suspicion on the Duke's part——"

"You believe, then," interrupted Lord Clandon, "that my uncle is totally ignorant of the former acquaintance and of the love between Eliza and Bertram?"

"Oh, I am certain of it!" exclaimed Mrs. Bailey. "Eliza positively assured her father, within an hour after the wedding, that never from her lips should her husband hear of the past—nor from her conduct be led to suspect that her heart

was not his. And now, my lord, that I have told you the secret, what course do you consider it prudent to suggest?"

"These revelations, my dear Mrs. Bailey," responded Hugh, "have come upon me with such startling suddenness, that I am unable in a moment to proffer an opinion. I will tell you in a few days what I think ought to be done. Perhaps I may speak privately to my brother—worm out of him the history of his love—and then advise him to absent himself from a place where his presence is dangerous."

"In any case, my lord, do not compromise me," said Mrs. Bailey. "The Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian is civil and polite enough to me—for of course he cannot suspect that I had anything to do in leading Eliza to jilt him—and I do not want to be brought into collision with anybody."

"Rest assured, my dear Mrs. Bailey," rejoined Lord Clandon, "that I will manage the matter with as much tact and delicacy as if it were you yourself who had the conduct of it."

"I rely upon your lordship," said the foolish woman, who did not reflect that she had been avowing to the very individual most interested in the Duke's remaining unmarried, the schemes and stratagems to which she had been a party in order to bring about that alliance between his Grace and Eliza.

Having escorted Mrs. Bailey back to the mansion, Lord Clandon sauntered forth again into the grounds, to reflect upon all that he had just heard. Presently he beheld his uncle approaching along a shady avenue, accompanied by a large favourite bull-mastiff answering to the name of Pluto. His Grace was walking slowly, with the air of one in deep pre-occupation. The mystery of the scene which was constantly before his eyes, was bewildering him more and more; and he saw no issue thence by any feasible means.

"Ah! my dear uncle," said Clandon. "What! walking alone? Where are all the guests?"

"The Lomaxes are getting ready for departure," responded the Duke. "In fact, I don't wonder that they should have abridged their visit——"

Then stopping short, he suddenly stooped down to caress his dog in order to hide his vexation.

"What mean you, my dear uncle?" inquired Clandon, as if with an air of perfect surprise.

"I mean, Hugh," responded the Duke, suddenly turning his looks fixedly upon his nephew's countenance, "that there is something going on which I cannot comprehend. I must speak out: I am glad that accident has thus thrown you and me together at this moment. There is something in my heart that I burn to unbosom to a confidant. You love me, Hugh—you have testified the noblest and most disinterested attachment——I wish to God I could say the same of your brother!"

"What, my lord!" ejaculated Clandon: "has Bertram been wanting in love and respect towards your Grace—the head of the family—our benefactor—our uncle——"

"Hugh," interrupted the Duke of Marchmont, "it is impossible you could have remained blind to all that is going on. Bertram treats the Duchess with downright insult. At first his conduct was merely a cold reserve, on which the best interpretations might be put. But now he has been nearly ten days here; and instead of getting on a more friendly footing, he behaves with ill-concealed aversion. The Duchess, all amiability herself, will not admit that it is so: she cannot see through it. But I can blind myself no longer, Hugh. I have endeavoured in my own mind to make every possible allowance for Bertram—and all in vain. It is the blackest ingratitude on his part; and I am determined not to put up with it."

"But, my dear uncle," said Lord Clandon, with a conciliatory tone and manner, "pray do not judge hastily—pray do not visit your displeasure upon my brother. You have been pleased to signify that my conduct is worthy of your approval: as a favour therefore for myself, I entreat your Grace to be lenient towards poor Bertram."

"This intercession on your brother's behalf, Hugh, does you infinite credit," rejoined the Duke of Marchmont. "But such conduct is intolerable! It is not merely insulting to the Duchess—insulting to myself—but insulting likewise to all the guests. A damp has been thrown upon the spirits of a circle which I gathered about me for purposes of gaiety."

"Would you, my dear uncle, permit me to offer a suggestion?" asked Lord Clandon, in a mild and submissive manner.

"To be sure, Hugh!" responded the Duke. "Speak! I am glad that your own magnanimous conduct enables me to treat you as a confidant. In a word, do you not think that your brother is chafed at this marriage of mine—and that he is venting his spite upon the Duchess?"

"No, uncle!" ejaculated Lord Clandon, with the emphasis of conviction: "I am certain that it is not so. Bertram is too generous-hearted, too magnanimous to entertain any such mean and paltry feelings. I, who know my brother's disposition well, can read the clue to the whole mystery."

"Can you?" exclaimed the Duke, full of delight and suspense. "Then, what is it? But take care, my dear nephew," he added more gravely, "how you suffer your love for your brother to blind your eyes to the real truth."

"Listen, uncle—and judge for yourself," responded Lord Clandon. "My brother is a young man naturally diffident—naturally afraid also of having his actions wrongly judged. He was ever like this. His very sensitiveness throws him into extremes: the delicacy of his sentiments sometimes renders his conduct seemingly outrageous. He doubtless trembles lest the slightest attention paid to his amiable young relative, should be wrongly construed——"

"Well, but those are the very conjectures with which I myself," interrupted the Duke, with an air of disappointment, "have sought to account for his conduct: but I fear that they are not the correct ones."

"Bear with me, uncle," said Hugh deferentially; "and grant me your patience. My brother is two years younger than myself; and though he has seen more of the world in the shape of travel, he knows less of it in useful experience. Regard his position!—a young man of a little more than three-and-twenty, suddenly presented to a lady-relative, even younger than himself. He feels that it is not for *him*, but for *her*, to define the degree of friendly intimacy and becoming cordiality on which they are to stand towards each other.

Doubtless as he found her ladyship, so has he modelled his own conduct."

"Indeed, Hugh," observed the Duke, as he slowly retrospected over all the details of his wife's and Bertram's bearing towards each other,—"I think you are right. And now I remember, the very first moment he made his appearance at Oaklands, Eliza did not receive him with a befitting welcome. Yes—there is much truth in your words. She neither gave him her hand, nor spoke a single syllable, till I prompted her to do both. I fear me that Eliza was to blame after all!"

"You see therefore, dear uncle, that Bertram has measured his own demeanour by that of the Duchess. Her Grace received him frigidly, as you have just explained to me. Now, Bertram has his pride as well as his sensitiveness——"

"I understand it all!" exclaimed the Duke. "Idiot that I was, not to comprehend it before! Of course, it was natural enough! Bertram thought himself slighted. He came with enthusiastic feelings of kindness towards us both; and at the very first instant of his encounter with the Duchess, those feelings were chilled within him. After so cold a reception, it was clearly for her, as the mistress of the mansion, to make amends by the increasing cordiality of her demeanour. She has been cold—she has been inhospitable; and Bertram's sensitiveness has shrunk from so much glacial reserve. Truly, Eliza has been to blame—and poor Bertram is to be pitied. I will go at once and speak my mind to the Duchess."

"Not so, dear uncle!" exclaimed Lord Clandon, holding the Duke back. "You have condescended to listen to my mode of reading the mystery——"

"You are as clear-headed, Hugh, as you are generous-hearted," cried the Duke. "Proceed! I will be guided by your counsel."

"If I were you," continued Clandon, "I would say nothing to the Duchess in the form of upbraiding: I would not even suffer her Grace to perceive that you understand the reason of Bertram's conduct, or that you attribute it to a prideful sensitiveness at her Grace's coldness. But this is what I would do:—I would take opportunities to throw her Grace and Bertram more together,—so that while the former will be forced to unbend, the latter will be compelled to take such unbending as an atonement for past inhospitality. It were a pity that there should be any differences in a family within the circle of which all the elements of happiness and good-fellowship are comprised."

"Right, my dear nephew!" exclaimed the Duke: "your counsel is admirable—and it shall be adopted. I will go at once and see what can be done. By the bye, the Lomaxes are about to take their departure: let us hasten to bid them farewell."

The Duke and Lord Clandon accordingly retraced their way towards the mansion, which they reached just as Sir William Lomax's travelling-chariot drove round to the front entrance. The Duchess and the other guests, including Bertram, came forth from the hall to see the Lomaxes off; and the farewells being said, the chariot drove away with Sir William and his family. Those who remained behind, lingered upon the steps in conversation for a little while—when the Duke abruptly said, "I forgot to tell you all that the new fountain has commenced playing this morning at the end of the lower terrace. Come—let us go and witness it. Clandon, give your arm to Miss Anstruther—Bertram, take you charge of the Duchess—Mrs. Bailey, permit me to be your escort."

Bertram Vivian could not possibly refuse an injunction so positively delivered: Eliza, on the other hand, could not decline the offer of his arm. The Duke flung a quick glance of satisfied triumph at his elder nephew, as much as to bid him observe how dexterously he had taken the first step in following his counsel; and the procession of ladies and gentlemen, consisting of pairs, moved away from the front of the mansion.

The feather rests not more lightly upon the ground from which the slightest breath of the zephyr may lift it, than did Eliza's hand on the arm of Bertram Vivian! They led the way towards the fountain; and Bertram's conversation was confined to topics of the veriest indifference,—Eliza only answering in monosyllables. The fountain was reached: it was flinging up its jet of water high into the air—and opinions of approval were generally pronounced.

"Now," said the Duke, "let us ramble without restraint about the grounds. The weather is too charmingly fine not to be taken advantage of. Bertram, I do not think you have seen the grapery; and I recollect that the Duchess was speaking of it this morning. You go thither. Mrs. Bailey, I promised to show you my golden pheasants: they are in this direction."

The party, consisting of pairs—as already said—separated from the vicinage of the fountain, and thus broke up as it were, each couple sauntering into the path which struck the fancy at the moment,—all but Bertram and Eliza; and they remained riveted near the fountain, each a prey to a deep inward agitation.

But they were now alone together!

CHAPTER VI.

BERTRAM AND ELIZA.

Alone together, for the first time since they had thus met at Oaklands!—alone for the first time since they parted three years and some months back, in the little parlour at Oxford! Alone together!—dangerous position—and, Oh! how embarrassing—how full of ineffable feelings too, for those who had loved so tenderly and so well!

The Duchess was marble-pale: but on Bertram's cheeks there was the hectic flush of excitement,—not a flush gradually dying off into the surrounding whiteness of the skin—but a deep red spot upon either cheek-bone, as if consumption's illusive dyes were glowing there. A false, unnatural fire burnt in his eyes: it was evident that he felt like a man who had just reached some crisis which had been foreseen—which he had known must come—but yet, when it did arrive, found him utterly unprepared to meet it. He trembled with agitation: he could no longer repress his feelings. A glance over either shoulder showed him that the last couples of the party were disappearing in the shady avenues; and there he was, *alone* with her

whose image was indelibly impressed upon his heart—whose love had been alike his elysian joy and his ineffable misery!

Several minutes passed: and there they stood,—Eliza seeming to have her looks fixed upon the fountain, but in reality beholding nothing—Bertram now contemplating her with the strong excitement of feelings too long pent up to be repressible any longer.

"Eliza!" he said at length: and that word—that name—was alone thrown out at the time from his lips: it was followed by naught beside: he knew not what more to say—and yet he felt that he had a million things of which to disburden his oppressed spirit.

And that name, when spoken by *his* lips, thrilled with galvanic effect through her entire form. Never had she thought that her own name was beautiful until she had first heard it pronounced by his tongue. And his voice, too, had all those melting cadences—all that clouded harmony of sadness, which is so perfectly but dangerously calculated to stir up the tenderest emotions of the soul.

"Eliza!" he repeated after a long pause, during which he had gazed on her with mingled rapture and despair: "at length we are alone together."

"And we ought *not* to be alone together," she answered, in a voice which would have been inaudible were it not for its natural clearness: and now her cheeks were suddenly mantled in blushes.

"Wherefore should we not be alone?" asked Bertram bitterly. "Is it that your conscience tells you I have come as an accuser—and that you are afraid to look your accuser in the face?"

"No, Mr. Vivian!" said the Duchess proudly, as she raised her eyes and fixed them on him for a few moments: then they were suddenly bent downward again, and the pearly tears gushed forth. "I see," she added, again in a voice scarcely audible, "that you believe me guilty of the foulest, vilest, most dishonourable perfidy. But it was not so——No, Bertram—it was not so!"

"What, Eliza?" he ejaculated in amazement: "what is this that I hear?"—then the next moment he added with scornful bitterness, "But you are heaping insult upon injury to treat me as a poor credulous fool!"

"Bertram," answered the Duchess, in a voice that was low but clear, and again raising her eyes towards his countenance, on which she gazed with the steadiness of innocence in her looks,—"as I have a soul to be saved—as there is an Almighty who hears my words now, and will punish me hereafter if I wilfully deceive you—I was not guilty!"

"Eliza," said Bertram, suddenly seized with the wild excitement of rage, fury, and indignation—and again his eyes flashed forth unnatural fires,—"if you were deceived, maledictions—ten thousand, thousand maledictions upon the heads of those——"

"Cease!" almost shrieked forth the horrified Duchess, her countenance expressing ineffable agony. "You would invoke curses upon the head of my perished father!"

"My God, I comprehend it all!" murmured Bertram: and he placed his hand upon his throbbing brows, as if thereby to steady the brain that rocked and reeled within.

"Yes," continued Eliza, now hurried away by the strong impulse which opportunity as well as her own feelings gave her to justify herself,—"I was deceived, Bertram—cruelly deceived! God, who alone can read the human heart, knows how true I was to you; and if an angel-witness were to appear before you now, that holy being could tell how I cherished your image while you were absent—how I cherished it even after the terrible report that you had gone down to a grave in the deep waters! Bertram, it was not until I became another's, that I learnt the tremendous truth that you were alive!"

"Eliza, Eliza! this is agony for me to hear!" murmured the wretched Bertram, his countenance filled with despair. "I wrote to your father twice——"

"I know it," she interrupted him softly—but, Oh! with what a world of ineffable feeling in her looks: "I know it. My father deceived me—— But spare him—spare his memory——May God have forgiven him!"

"Eliza," continued Bertram, "I believe you. There is truth in your looks—truth in your words. I always believed you truthful—until the fatal day, when on arriving in England to hasten and claim you as my bride, I read in a newspaper the report of your marriage. Just heaven! what searing, blinding, sight-blasting words for me! Do you know, Eliza, that for hours I was like one gone mad—that I strove to lay violent hands upon myself, and that the persons of the hotel prevented me?"

"Bertram, Bertram—tell me not all this!" moaned Eliza, sobbing bitterly: "it is more than I can endure! Since the first instant that the intelligence of your death reached me, my life has been one long agony—one continuous throe of indescribable despair. The rack may torture for hours or for days—and the miseries of the victim will end in death: but my rack, Bertram, has now lasted for more than two long years——and it will last, Bertram, until I go down into the cold grave where alone this heart of mine can be at peace!"

"Eliza, it is now for me to implore you to be calm—to entreat that you will not talk to me in this distracting, frightful way!"—and Bertram, falling on his knees upon the stone margin of the fountain's reservoir, took her hand and pressed it to his lips: but the next instant dropping it—nay, more, even tossing it away from him—he started up, exclaiming in violent excitement, "That hand is another's!—it is sacrilege in me to touch it!"

Eliza's tears fell fast and bitterly. She would not have withdrawn her hand of her own accord—at least not so abruptly as he had flung it from him. She was shocked—she was hurt—she was wounded: the affliction which that poor creature endured in those rending moments, was such as no man, even the most vindictive, could wish his mortal enemy to undergo.

"Pardon me, Eliza," said Bertram, in a tone of tenderest contrition; "I was rude—I was brutal. But, heavens! I am not the master of myself!"—and again he pressed his feverish hand to his wildly throbbing brows. "Let me say a few words of explanation," he resumed after a while, and speaking in a more collected manner. "By a

miracle—or by almost one—I was rescued from a watery grave in the depths of the Potomac. I knew that the report of an accident in which so many lives were lost—indeed all save one—would be copied from the American into the English newspapers; and when recovered from the almost fatal illness of many weeks into which the shock and horror of the calamity plunged me, I lost no time in writing to your father. Not a doubt was in my mind but that your fears would have been relieved as to myself, long before that letter could reach England: but if not, it was beyond the power of human conception to suppose that your father would keep you in that dark, dreadful belief of my death. Oh, Eliza! how I counted the months—the weeks—the days—the hours, that were to elapse ere I beheld you again!—Oh, how I cherished your image! Never man loved as I loved—never, never!"

He turned abruptly aside; and his convulsive sobbings smote upon Eliza's ears—striking her very brain as if with a succession of heaviest blows—impaling her heart upon the stake of indescribable agony. And yet she dared not stretch out a hand to touch him—to awaken him as it were from that night-mare of hideous woe. She remembered that she was a wife; and though the very thought was crucifixion, it was nevertheless one which she must endure.

"Yes, Eliza," continued Bertram, when after a short space he grew calmer: "no man ever loved as I loved! At length I reached England," he continued, abruptly taking up the thread of his narrative—"joy, ineffable joy in my heart. Behold yon butterfly sipping the honey from the flower on which it has settled. Thus did my soul rest on the delicious sweets of its own reflections: thus did my spirit repose in delight upon the roseate tints of love, the fairest flower of the human heart! But what if a rude hand were abruptly stretched forth to clutch that poor butterfly, and stripping off its wings, were to toss it, still alive, on that parterre, to writhe out the rest of its existence in agonies—never more to sip the sweets of the flower from which it was taken? But thus was it with me: thus was it with the soul that lives in this breast!"

And as Bertram spoke, he beat his clenched fist violently upon his chest.

"You will drive me mad!" murmured Eliza, who seemed as if she were about to faint.

"Heaven forgive me," cried Bertram, "for torturing you thus!—but I cannot check this outpouring of my feelings. The burden of my sufferings is too great, Eliza, for my soul to bear. I have but a few words more to say; and I entreat you to hear them. I was at Liverpool when I read the account of your marriage in the paper—a marriage with my own uncle! What could I think, but that you were faithless to me? When reason returned, I wrote to the Government, entreating to be at once appointed to a post in another Embassy: for I had resigned my situation in that at Washington. My request was promptly acceded to: I was nominated to the Embassy at St. Petersburgh. Thither I sped without delay. Never did man travel so fast! It was the mad endeavour to outstrip my thoughts—to distance, so to speak, the agonies which, like pursuing fiends or ravenous wolves, were upon my track. At length I was ordered home to England with important despatches. I arrived, as you are aware, but a few days back; and I said to myself, 'I will see her once more. Such perfidy as her's, in return for so much love, must not go unreproached. Whatever the risk be, I will see her!'—And there was another reason too, Eliza: it was that I purposed to give back your ring, and to demand mine."

"Take back your ring, Bertram," said Eliza, in a low tremulous voice; and now it seemed to her that she was about to sever the very last feeble tie which in any way connected her with an elysian past;—and as she spoke, she slowly drew forth the ring from her bosom.

"Ah!" ejaculated Bertram Vivian, a wild joy flashing suddenly in his eyes: "you have kept it *there*—next to your heart! Oh! then, Eliza, you have not ceased to love me, even when becoming another's?"

"Bid the flower divest itself of its fragrance—bid the green plant put off its verdure of its own accord," she answered solemnly; "and it is commanding impossibilities. Bid the waters of that fountain cease to well upward while the motive power is there; and it were also commanding what cannot be done. Think not therefore that my heart could put away that love which has become as inseparable from it in life as the fragrance is from the flower or the verdure from the plant while the warm season lasts! Think not either that it is in my power to still the feelings which rise upward from the hidden springs of my soul!"

There was a holy solemnity—a sanctified pathos, in Eliza's tone as she thus spoke; and as her words ceased, she proffered the ring which she had drawn forth from her bosom.

"No, Eliza—no!" exclaimed Bertram, with renewed excitement. "I will not take it back! Whatever henceforth we may be to each other——and that perhaps is as nothing," he added bitterly——"still, still shall you retain the pledge of my love, as I will keep the pledge of your's. There can be no sin in this!"

"I will keep it, Bertram," answered the Duchess, after a few moments' hesitation; and she consigned the ring back to its resting-place next her heart.

"Oh! but if all this be possible," abruptly exclaimed Bertram Vivian, as fresh ideas came sweeping through his mind, but replete with newly awakened suspicion and mistrust, all the force and anguish of which were at the same instant reflected in his countenance,—"how was it, Eliza, that you bestowed your hand upon mine own uncle? Did it not strike you that there was something to shock the purity of the feelings——"

"Accuse me not, Bertram," interrupted Eliza, with a look full of candid yet mournful ingenuousness. "There is not a question you can put to me, which I am not prepared to answer. And I will answer every one frankly and truthfully. Oh! if this were not my purpose, I might shield myself in dissimulations of all kinds—I might affect offended pride and indignant innocence at being thus questioned! But as my soul is guileless, it needs not such artifices wherein to take refuge. Bertram," continued the young lady, with an expression of ineffable woe upon her countenance and

anguish in her tones, "you know not all the arts that were adopted to enmesh me in this web which is inextricable. God forgive me that I should thus have to allude to my own father: but it is so! As I have a soul to be saved, I knew not that my husband was your uncle until the knowledge came too late. Never had I heard that the Marquisate of Viviandale had been changed into the Dukedom of Marchmont——"

"One word, Eliza!" ejaculated Bertram, who during the first portion of her speech had become all confidence and trustfulness in her sincerity,—but in whose heart the reptile of suspicion suddenly lifted up its head again: "is it possible that during the months of courtship my uncle never once alluded to myself?"

"Never once!" responded Eliza emphatically. "He never spoke of his relations—much less named them. And my father was careful that the name of Vivian should never be mentioned in my hearing, in connexion with the Duke of Marchmont. Are you not aware that the nuptials were private?"

"Ah, private! I understand!" ejaculated Bertram bitterly; "the better to exclude the members of the family! But as you have mentioned the nuptials, Eliza," he went on to say—and now his eyes were riveted upon her with all the scrutinizing keenness of fresh suspicion, fresh distrust,—"when the minister was performing the ceremony, did he not ask you if you would take John Ferdinand Henry Vivian, Duke of Marchmont, as your husband? And you said *yes!*"

"Bertram," responded Eliza, steadily meeting his gaze with looks that were all ingenuous sadness and mournful innocence,—"that marriage ceremony was to me a dream at the time: it appears to me a dream now. I beheld everything through a mist: and if I look back upon it from the present moment, it still appears a something shrouded in obscurity and gloom. Yes, it was a dream—a waking dream, in which I slumbered with my eyes open. I beheld naught—I heard naught—I felt naught. No—I felt not even when the marriage-ring was placed upon my finger; and if I responded *yes* to the question that was put to me, it was either mechanically, or else because there was some one nigh to whisper the word in my ear. Had the name of him whom I was taking as a husband, been that of Lucifer himself, I should not have heard it—I should not have perceived it in that paralysis of the senses: I should have unconsciously become the bride of Satan! Oh, Bertram! it is not the least cruel of all the phases of the ordeal of torture through which my lorn and desolate existence has been dragged,—it is not the least cruel, I say, that I am compelled to give these explanations—these self-vindications now!"

"Oh! wretch that I am, it is I who torture you!" exclaimed Bertram, literally shivering from head to foot in the wildness of his excitement and the frenzy of his feelings: "I who love you so madly, am torturing you thus horribly! But again I declare to you, Eliza, that I am not master of myself! God knows I strive to look upon the world in the same light that I used to regard it—as one of sunshine and of flowers: but the sunshine turns into a dark noisome mist enveloping me in a pestilential haze—the flowers, so beautiful to the eye, appear to exhale poisons; and methinks that if I stretch forth my hand to pluck one, a reptile would start forth from amidst the foliage and fix its venomed fangs upon my flesh! Yes—everything is changed to me. The world appears to be made up of deceits, with a gloss over all: the parterres of roses are but hidden pitfalls for the feet. Is it not dreadful, Eliza, that one so young as I, should have his heart thus seared—thus warped—thus devastated, so that everything I behold or reflect upon is viewed with suspicion and mistrust?"

"It is dreadful—dreadful, Bertram!" murmured the unhappy young lady, quivering from head to foot. "But for heaven's sake, talk no more thus!"

"What would you have me talk of?" cried Bertram, with increasing bitterness. "Would you have me speak of happiness?—it is gone for ever. Of hope?—there is none for me. What inducement have I to prosecute a career which would have led me on to fame and fortune?—she on whose brow it would have been the proudest moment of my life to place the laurels won by intellect, or the coronet to be gained in the service of my country, has become another's. Ah, Eliza!" he ejaculated abruptly, as a fresh suspicion flashed to his mind: "you said just now that you had some knowledge of those letters which I wrote to your father——"

"I found them in his desk after his decease," interrupted the Duchess. "Then—and not till then—did I learn that you were alive. Then too—and not till then—did I learn that I might have been your's. No mortal eyes, Bertram, beheld my rending anguish on that occasion. But God saw it!—and believe me, that never did the heart of woman throb with such throes—never did human eyes shed such tears—never did living creature kneel for a while in such profound, dark, unutterable despair! And yet there was one thing, Bertram, for which I thanked God—and only *one* thing! It was that you had not perished in the deep waters—that your young life had not been snatched away!"

"Would to heaven that I had so died, Eliza!" ejaculated Bertram bitterly. "But those letters of mine—those two letters——did your father leave them that you might become acquainted with his guilt?"

"No," she responded. "Perhaps you have been told that he died suddenly—that he was stricken down all in an instant——"

"Aye, as if by the blasting lightning!" interjected Bertram, with a fierce sardonic bitterness. "Perhaps there was heaven's retribution in that!"

"Spare me, spare me!" moaned the wretched Eliza, clasping her hands in agony. "Remember that it is to the daughter of that departed father you are now speaking!"

"God help me, Eliza!" exclaimed Bertram, once more pressing his hand to his brow, and staggering back a few paces: "I tell you that I am going mad. But those letters—wherefore had he not destroyed them?"

"It is a mystery which I cannot explain," replied the Duchess, in a low murmuring voice. "Perhaps an unknown—an unaccountable influence led him to preserve them:—or perhaps it was an oversight——"

"No, no, Eliza!" ejaculated Vivian, with feverish quickness: "it was no oversight—it was the all-powerful, unseen, unknown, but irresistible influence of which you have spoken. The finger of heaven was in it! It was decreed that the evidences of my constancy, my fidelity, my unperished and imperishable love, should survive your father—that those evidences should not constitute a secret to die with him—but that they should exist to meet your eyes, and convince you that Bertram Vivian was true to his plight!"

"And do you still mean to reproach me?" asked Eliza, in tones that were scarcely audible, while the tears rained down her cheeks. "It is cruel, Bertram—it is unkind—after all the explanations I have given you. Methought that you were ere now satisfied of—of—my own imperishable love, when you saw that I carried your ring next to my heart?"

"Eliza, I have wronged you!" exclaimed Vivian, who throughout this long and painful interview had been moved by a thousand different and conflicting impulses. "Pardon—forgive me! My conduct has not only been unkind: it is brutal—cowardly—base! You have been a victim—I see it all——May heaven have mercy upon us both!"

"And now, Bertram," asked Eliza, at length coming to the question which she had foreseen must be put, "what is to be done? how will you act?"

"What mean you?" he demanded abruptly, a wild joy flashing in his eyes. "Would you——"

"Bertram, Bertram!" almost shrieked forth Eliza, as she read what was passing in his mind. "No!—there is *one* sacrifice I cannot make for you; and this is the sacrifice of my duty to my husband. I would lay down my life for you: but not for worlds would I prove faithless to the vows of duty, constancy, and obedience which I pledged to him whose name I bear!"

"Eliza, forgive me—pardon me—I beseech you!" said Bertram, in a tone and with a look of deepest, most humiliating contrition. "If for an instant I yielded to the wild—the thrilling—the impossible hope which flashed to my mind, it was not that I could deliberately insult the purity of your character. No, no! heaven forbid that I should prove a villain—that I should brand myself as a wretch——No, no—I will not!"

He seized the hand of the Duchess as he thus enthusiastically spoke, and pressed it with convulsive violence.

"Bertram," she said, in a low soft voice, as she gently disengaged her hand, "again I ask you what you will do, now that the interview which was inevitable has taken place? You must not remain here."

"And I cannot leave all in a moment!" quickly responded Vivian. "Take my arm—let us slowly return to the mansion. For a few days, Eliza, must I linger here: it would excite the strangest thoughts if I were to depart precipitately."

"And I have been half afraid, Bertram," murmured the Duchess, "that strange thoughts have already been excited by your demeanour towards me."

"Oh, I have been half mad!" he ejaculated. "I have known not what to do. When coldest and most distant towards you—when, believing you wilfully faithless, I have been pointedly frigid and reserved in my manner—my heart was in reality bursting. I could have thrown myself at your feet, imploring your pardon—I could have cried out in the strong voice of my agony—I could have melted into tears and wept like a child. But you ask me what I will do? I will remain yet a few days, until the Duke shall have procured for me the promised diplomatic situation in some far-off land—the farther off, the better: and then, Eliza, we will part——to meet no more!"

The Duchess gave no response. She took Vivian's arm; and they walked on together through a shady avenue towards the house. She would fain have urged his prompt departure: she trembled lest, after this interview, there should be a change in their demeanour towards each other, so marked and pointed as to excite attention. But how could she express a wish to hurry him away? how could she utter the word which was to make him precipitate the moment when he would bid farewell to her for ever? She could not—she had not the heart to do so: while on the other hand, she felt so firm in the rectitude of her own principles—so strong in the sense of that duty which she owed to her husband—that she did not even insult herself by thinking of the necessity of avoiding temptation.

They entered the mansion; and Eliza at once retired to her own boudoir—there to reflect, in solitude and without restraint, upon all that had taken place——and there, perhaps, to weep likewise over her sad, sad lot which might have been so different!

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADY AVENUE.

THAT evening, when a domestic entered the drawing-room to announce that dinner was served up, Bertram hastened forward to escort the Duchess of Marchmont to the banqueting-room—an act of courtesy which for some days he had ceased to perform. And now, too, it was all the more marked, inasmuch as it was the place of his elder brother, Lord Clandon, to perform that ceremonial office. But the Duke was pleased when he beheld the incident; and he flung a significant look upon Lord Clandon, as much as to bid him observe that the Duchess and Bertram were already getting upon a little more friendly footing, so that the elements of discord might be expected soon to disappear from the bosom of the family.

Bertram sat next to the Duchess at dinner; and though a complete change had taken place in his mind towards her—though he now regarded her as a victim who still loved him, and not as a wilfully faithless one who had ceased to love—he had a sufficient power of self-control not to show by his conduct any abrupt alteration in his feelings. He was now, to all outward appearance, courteously polite, and nothing more,—courteously polite and profoundly respectful. Still that politeness,—evidencing itself in the thousand little attentions which the circumstances of the dinner-table enable a gentleman to manifest towards a lady next to whom he is placed,—was a considerable advance

upon the former glacial frigidity of his demeanour. The Duke however was pleased: Lord Clandon seemed likewise gratified by his brother's courtesy towards their young and beautiful relative; and his lordship took an opportunity to whisper to the Duke when the ladies had retired, "You see, dear uncle, that my advice was good. Her Grace has unbent somewhat; and Bertram's wounded pride is healing proportionately."

On the following day there was a riding-party after breakfast. Bertram required not to be pressed to join it; and somehow or another, he found himself, when they started off, by Eliza's side. In the afternoon there was a boating-party: Bertram had no letters to write—no other kind of exercise, recommended by his physician, to take—no plea of indisposition to keep him indoors. He escorted the Duchess to the barge; and he again kept by her side when they took their places therein. But at dinner-time prudence whispered in his ear that he must not continue to monopolize the society of his fair relative: Lord Clandon therefore escorted her to the banqueting-room.

In the evening, when they were all in the drawing-room, Lord Clandon, after lounging about with a languid fashionable ease—chatting to one, then to another—pausing to look over a print, or loitering a few minutes near the piano at which a young lady was seated,—presently dropped into a chair next to that occupied by the Duchess: for Bertram, having been seated with her for the previous half-hour, had thought it prudent to bestow some attention on others present.

"You know not," said Lord Clandon, in a low voice to Eliza, "how deeply I felt my first meeting with that dearly beloved brother of mine, after our separation of more than three years. Your Grace must not think me so spoilt by the pursuits of the fashionable world, as to have lost all fraternal love. Besides, Bertram is a brother of whom one can be proud. I do really believe he is the handsomest young man in all England. What exquisitely chiselled features! what symmetry of form! But all that is nothing in comparison with the light of intellect which shines upon his noble brow. And yet I fear me," added Clandon, in a tone of mysterious confidence, "that he is not happy."

Eliza was actually frightened as Hugh addressed her in these terms. She trembled to the very utmost confines of her being—but it was with an inward tremor, outwardly invisible. She dreaded lest Clandon had penetrated the secret: but as she bent her searching gaze upon him, while he was riveting his own looks upon the graceful form of Bertram at the farther extremity of the room, she felt satisfied that there was really nothing significant in his remarks—but that they were merely conversational, the topic being caught up by accident at the moment.

"Yes," continued Clandon, "I believe and hope that Bertram is destined to shine in the world. My uncle, your Grace's noble husband—as noble in nature as he is in name—has written most pressingly to the Government to appoint Bertram as Minister to one of the minor Courts; and I have no doubt that in a few days intelligence will arrive that the Duke of Marchmont's interest has not been exercised in vain."

Eliza made some suitable response; and Lord Clandon, after a little more conversation of the same sort, highly eulogistic of Bertram,—rose and sauntered away to another part of the room.

"My dear Mrs. Bailey," he presently took an opportunity of whispering in this lady's ear, "you saw yesterday and to-day that there has been some little change in my brother's demeanour towards the Duchess. The fact is, I have no doubt things will be all right now; and those two in whom we are both naturally so much interested, will get upon that amicable footing whereupon they ought to stand together."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Bailey, also in a low cautious tone. "I thought that Mr. Vivian was behaving differently: for when we met at breakfast this morning, and the Duchess glanced at the cold chicken, your brother was the first to offer her a wing."

"Nothing can transcend your shrewdness and penetration, my dear Mrs. Bailey," rejoined Clandon with a smile: and he then lounged towards the piano again.

A week passed away from the date of that interview which we have recorded at such length in the preceding chapter—an interview in which all the acutest and intensest feelings of which human nature is susceptible, were called into play. Bertram and Eliza loved as fondly as ever: how could it be otherwise? But still they were both shielded against temptation by the rectitude of their principles; and thus when left alone for hours together, it was only in their looks and in their sighs that the Duchess was unfaithful in her duty to a husband, or Bertram in that towards an uncle. They spoke no more of their love: it was a topic which by tacit consent they avoided. There was no significant pressure of the hands—no embrace snatched—no kiss exchanged. Yet as they sat or walked together, they often found themselves, when unobserved by others, gazing into the depths of each other's eyes; and when suddenly recollecting that there was impropriety and danger in this, they averted their looks amidst blushes on the cheeks and sighs coming up from the heart,—those looks however which were again so soon to meet and blend in the soft transfusion of their spirits! And these looks, impossible of control—impossible of repression, conveyed all the adoration which was mutually felt,—fondness commingling with fondness—the beams of tenderness entertwining together. But their discourse, as we have already said, was not upon love; and they were both too intellectual to dwell incessantly upon light every-day topics—while, on the other hand, they could not bring their minds to the calm, serious, deliberate discussion of books, the sciences, or the arts. Therefore was it that long intervals of silence would reign between them—but a silence only of the tongues—a silence in the midst of which a thousand things were said by the eloquent language of the eyes. Any stranger who might have seen that young man of god-like beauty, and that young lady of excelling loveliness, would have at once concluded that they were mated in marriage, or that they were lovers soon to be so joined: for even the most superficial glance must have perceived a certain fitness in the union of this couple. But destiny had decreed otherwise:—they loved, yet they were not mated; they adored each other—but a stupendous gulf existed between them.

The Duke of Marchmont never for a moment suspected that it was possible for his wife and Bertram to form an attachment for each other—much less that they already loved from an old-standing acquaintance. He believed in the high honour of his nephew and in the purity of his wife. And he was right in so believing. He never even asked himself whether it were dangerous that they should thus be thrown together: the thought never for an instant entered his head. He was by no means a jealous man: that is to say, his jealousy was difficult to excite save and except by palpable evidence and on unquestionable grounds. He had flattered himself that Eliza loved him; and in the glacial coldness which she and Bertram had mutually shown during the first few days of the young man's presence at Oaklands, he had seen what he thought to be the demonstrations of positive aversion towards each other. Now, therefore, that he saw their manner mutually changed, he rejoiced to think that they had got upon a more friendly footing; and he said to himself, "Eliza is making atonement for her chilling inhospitality of the first ten days; and Bertram, with a chivalrous magnanimity, is doing his best to convince her that her former conduct is forgotten and forgiven. Hugh certainly gave me the best possible advice; and I wronged poor Bertram when I attributed the frigid reserve of his demeanour to an ungenerous aversion to the alliance which I have formed."

Thus, we say, did a week pass from the date of that interview in which Bertram and Eliza gave mutual explanations, and passed through such an ordeal of rending, agonizing emotions. This week flew rapidly away in the estimation of the two lovers: for such indeed they were. They both felt that it was wrong to be so much together,—dangerous to what little remained of their wrecked happiness, if not dangerous to their virtue. Yet

by an irresistible attraction were they brought together again and again; and each successive day beheld them more and more in each other's society. This was at least some happiness for them: it was another dream in which they were to a certain extent cradled,—but a dream to the waking up from which they neither dared to look forward. At length however they were startled from this dream, as rudely as a loud clanging bell smites upon the ear of a sleeper; and they were startled up, too, unto a sense of anguish as acute as that which the doomed one feels when wakened by the striking of the clock which tells him that in another hour he is to die.

One morning, when the letters and newspapers were placed upon the breakfast-table, by the Duke of Marchmont's side, there was one document amongst the missives, which the experienced eye of Bertram at once recognised as a despatch from the Foreign Office; and the quick glance which he threw upon the Duchess, made her likewise aware that something might now be expected—something that should decree the doom of separation. The Duke took up the packet—opened it—read it—and then, extending his hand to Bertram, said with a smiling countenance, "Permit me, my dear nephew, to be the first to congratulate you on your appointment as Minister to the Court of Florence."

"And I, my dear brother," exclaimed Lord Clandon, with every demonstration of pride and joy, "likewise congratulate you on this distinguished promotion."

Eliza proffered congratulations also: but it was with an almost preterhuman effort that she kept down the flood of feelings which surged up into her very throat. Mrs. Bailey and the other guests followed in the congratulatory strain: but the Duchess perceived that it was with a forced urbanity and a difficultly repressed petulance of impatience, that Bertram responded in a suitable and becoming manner.

"You perceive, my dear nephew," resumed the Duke, "that your nomination to the Tuscan Embassy is accompanied by the strictest injunctions that you set off for Italy with the least possible delay. Much as I shall be grieved to part with you, I dare not suffer my own selfish feelings to stand in the way of your public duties. To-morrow therefore, Bertram, you must bid us farewell."

"Yes—to-morrow!" said the young man, in a voice the strangeness of which was only comprehended by Eliza—unless indeed it were also understood by Lord Clandon, who knew the secret of their love: for Mrs. Bailey was at the moment too busy in the discussion of a piece of Perigord pie to take notice of anything else.

After breakfast Eliza and Bertram walked forth together in the garden: Mrs. Bailey and the other guests accompanied Lord Clandon on a visit to the grapery: the Duke of Marchmont retired to the library, to address a letter to the Foreign Secretary thanking that Minister for the prompt attention paid to his request on Bertram's behalf. But on reaching the library, the Duke perceived a note lying on the writing-table, addressed to himself. He wondered that it should have been left there, instead of being brought in unto him, as was the custom with all correspondence, the instant of its arrival. It was not a letter with any postmark upon it; and therefore it had not come from any distance. The writing of the address was unknown to the Duke: but it occurred to him that it was written in a feigned hand. The writing all sloped backward instead of forward, just as if penned by the left hand instead of with the right: in short, it bore every indication of a studied attempt to disguise what it naturally would have been.

The Duke opened it: but scarcely had he read the first two or three lines, when the note dropped from his hand. He grew pale as death: sickness at the heart first seized upon him—then an almost maddening rage; and he was rushing to the door, when he abruptly stopped short. He grew calm all in an instant: but it was a terrible calmness—a calmness full of deep portentous menace. He picked up the note, and read it through. Its contents were not long: but they were significant—fearfully, terribly significant. This much might have been judged, were an observer present, by the growing corrugation of the Duke's brow,—the contraction of his forehead into lines so deep, so strongly marked that it appeared as if they never could leave that forehead in its wonted smoothness again.

"No," he muttered between his teeth, "it cannot be! It is a foul base calumny. An anonymous writer!—what faith is to be put in him? And yet—and yet——Eternal God! if it be so, I am the most miserable of men. Aye, but my vengeance shall be terrible!"

Then he paced to and fro in violent agitation,—until suddenly stopping short again, he looked at the letter once more. Dark and ominous was the shade which came over his countenance: his eyes shone with a sinister fire—his lips, ashy white, quivered as if with the palsy.

"No, no!" he ejaculated at length, and as if in answer to some thought or plan which had almost settled itself in his mind; "not without better proof than this!"

He slowly folded up the note—consigned it to his waistcoat-pocket—and issued from the mansion by a private staircase and a side-door. He descended into the grounds,—plunging at once in the midst of the most thickly wooded avenues. In a few minutes he beheld his wife and Bertram walking at a little distance. She was not leaning upon his arm: there was nothing in their demeanour to confirm the suspicion and justify the jealous rage which that anonymous letter had excited in the Duke's soul. Presently they turned at the end of the avenue: he concealed himself behind a group of evergreens, too thick for himself either to see or to be seen. But it was to their discourse, as they passed the spot, that he meant to listen. In a few minutes they drew near; and quite unconscious who was hidden by those bushes, they did pass.

"I shall leave immediately after breakfast to-morrow morning," Bertram was saying. "I must first repair to London, to pay my respects to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs; and then without loss of time must I proceed to Florence. It is most kind of my uncle to have interested himself in procuring me this appointment."

"Most kind!" observed Eliza.

Then there was a pause in the discourse; so that as they passed on, the Duke heard no more of the conversation when it was resumed. But if

through the dense foliage his eyes had been able to observe the countenance of the two lovers, he would have seen that their looks were mournfully significant enough—though the words which had reached his ears were without the slightest import. Yet even in them there *was* a significancy, though the Duke comprehended it not. They had been conversing seriously on the approaching separation: they had exerted all their fortitude to the attunement of their minds to the point necessary to make them recognise and acknowledge that it was better they should thus separate. There was consequently in their hearts a thankfulness of deeper meaning towards the Duke, than that which their words seemed to express,—a thankfulness that through his interest the opportunity and period had been brought about for a separation which they both laboured to recognise as so necessary. But the Duke of Marchmont, who neither saw their looks nor had overheard the previous portions of their discourse, was for a moment shocked that he should have given way to jealous suspicions on the faith of an anonymous letter. He was seized with a sense of profound humiliation: the natural pride of his soul revolted against his own conduct; and hurrying away from his hiding-place, he regained the mansion by a circuitous path. . . . .

Nevertheless the fiend of suspicion had obtained an entry into his soul: the demon of jealousy could not be so readily expelled as he wished, hoped, and thought. He endeavoured to compose himself to write—but he could not. He was restless and uneasy; and twenty times during the next hour, did he draw forth the anonymous letter and scan its contents again. When luncheon was served up, he carefully watched the conduct of Bertram and Eliza towards each other, though without having the slightest appearance of doing so. His perception was now sharpened; and he caught a rapid exchange of glances between them, which under other circumstances he would not have noticed, but which were now fraught with a tremendous significancy to his imagination.

After luncheon, Lord Clandon proposed a boating-party, which was readily assented to by every one present. Again did the Duke, during this recreation, continue to watch his wife and Bertram: but nothing occurred to strengthen his suspicions—and once more did he endeavour to reason himself into the belief that they were utterly unfounded. At about four o'clock the company, leaving the boats, retraced their way to the mansion; and the ladies separated to their own chambers to make some change in their toilets. The Duke retired to the library, which commanded a view of the grounds; and from the window did he keep watch. Presently he beheld Eliza and Bertram straying forth alone together, and slowly bending their steps towards the shady avenues. Again too did he descend by the private staircase and issue forth by the side door.

It was a delicious autumnal afternoon; and a genial warmth filled the atmosphere. Eliza had already dressed herself for dinner, when putting off her boating raiment, so as to avoid the trouble of performing another toilet. She wore a dark half-mourning dress—with a low body, according to the fashion of the times. Her arms were bare—those arms so exquisitely rounded: her bosom, neck, and shoulders shone dazzlingly in their polished whiteness. Nothing sets off a finely rounded form to greater advantage than dark apparel; and nothing can throw out the transparent purity of the skin more brilliantly. The superb contours of Eliza's shape, now in all the glory of rich womanhood—and the spotless beauty of her complexion, were thus advantageously displayed by her half-mourning garb. Her raven hair, with a rich velvet gloss upon it, flowed in heavy masses upon those dazzling shoulders, and formed a dark cloud against which her swan-like neck seemed an alabaster pillar. Never in the eyes of Bertram Vivian had she seemed so wondrously beautiful before; and as he walked by her side, gazing upon her with an irresistible fascination,—his heart, first melting into tenderness, was soon rent with agony at the thought that this was the last time they would ever be alone together—the last time perhaps that he would ever have an opportunity of so gazing, without restraint, on the object of his heart's adoration! And she too was profoundly moved. He had said at the interview by the fountain that when they parted it would be for ever; and these words he had not since recalled:—they remained therefore deeply imprinted upon her heart.

"To-morrow, Eliza," said Bertram, at length breaking a long silence, and speaking in the low deep voice of indescribable mournfulness,—"to-morrow we shall separate—and prudence tells me that it must be for ever! Would to God," he exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of that wild excitement which he had displayed at the fountain, but to which until now he had not again given way,—"would to God that I had not lingered here so long! I feel like one whose next step will be to plunge into the vortex of despair."

"Bertram, Bertram," murmured the afflicted lady, "we must exert that fortitude which by tacit consent has hitherto sustained us since we met yonder:"—and her eyes glanced towards the fountain.

"Oh! that expression of tacit consent, Eliza," ejaculated Vivian,—"does it not show that there is a blending of our spirits—a secret intelligence existing between our hearts—a transfusion of feeling from soul to soul——"

"Hush, Bertram!" said the Duchess: "we must not—we dare not give way again to our recollections of the past!"

"Oh! but that past is all our own, Eliza," cried Vivian, with growing excitement; "though the present is taken from us—and the future——. Ah! that future, dating from to-morrow—it will be a hideous blank on which I shudder to fix my gaze! No—not a hideous blank: it will be a world of rending, torturing feelings——By heaven, Eliza, I shall go mad! I cannot endure it—I shall lay violent hands upon myself!"

"Bertram!" almost shrieked forth the wretched Duchess, in a voice of piercing agony, "you horrify me—you fill me with despair!"

"Heaven forgive me, Eliza, for thus torturing you," said Bertram quickly; "but I am not able to control my feelings. Oh! wherefore was I born to endure so much misery? wherefore did I ever know you? Angel that you were to me at the time when we first loved, it is anguish—it is torture—it is crucifixion, to look upon you with the knowledge that you are lost to me—that you

are another's! O Eliza, you know not how much I was indebted to that love of your's. I never told you the truth before: I will tell it to you now. I was plunging headlong into the vortex of dissipation—I was weakly and shamefully suffering myself to be led on into vicious pleasures and the ways of extravagance, when you suddenly appeared in my path, clothed with all the brightness and the sweetness of a guardian angel. I loved you—you loved me in return; and it was that delicious love of your's which made me an altered being. From that moment my existence has been one of purity and honour; and I can look the world in the face without being conscious of aught to raise up a blush to my cheeks. It was you who did this, Eliza—you who saved me! How much therefore do I owe you!—with what grateful recollections is my love intertwined! Think you, then, that a love which is so blended with gratitude, can easily endure disappointment? No, Eliza—no. You are dearer to me than life; and to-morrow, when we separate, it will be for me like parting from that very life itself!"

"O Bertram, what can I say—what can I do, to comfort you?" murmured the almost heart-broken Eliza, as the tears rained down her cheeks and her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"What can you do—what can you say, Eliza? Nothing, nothing! There is but one thing——No, no—I dare not mention it: I will not entice you from your husband! But to leave you with him, is to condemn myself to a life of horror—or else to cut it short and perish in the blood of a distracted suicide!"

"Bertram," shrieked Eliza wildly; "recall those dreadful words. Oh, recall them, I implore you! For my sake—for all the love I bear you——"

"Oh, to hear you speak thus of your love," cried the impetuous and impassioned Bertram, "is the revival of joy ineffable!"—and obedient to the impulse of the moment, he caught Eliza in his arms—he strained her to his breast.

At that instant a cry so wild and savage that it resembled that of a ferocious hyena, smote on the ears of Bertram and the Duchess; and starting from each other's embrace, they flung their terrified looks around. Those looks encountered the Duke, who was just emerging from a shady avenue. Emerging!—no, he was rushing on with the mad fury of the wild beast whose cry his own had resembled; and Eliza, with a half stifled moan of soul-crushed agony, dropped senseless upon the ground. All in an instant the spectacle of the rabidly advancing Duke vanished from Bertram's gaze: he beheld only the inanimate form of the beloved Eliza. He raised her in his arms: kneeling upon the ground, he supported her against his breast: he besought her in passionate accents to open her eyes and to look upon him.

"Leave her, sir!" thundered the voice of the Duke: "leave her, sir! Begone—depart hence, execrable villain that you are!"

"Hear me, uncle—hear me, I conjure you!" exclaimed Vivian, a prey to such wild and torturing feelings as no pen can describe. "If not for my sake, at least for her's——"

"Begone, sir!" again thundered forth the Duke: and rushing forward, he violently tore the still inanimate form of his wife from Bertram's arms.

At this instant it happened that two of the female-servants, having been to some other part of the grounds, appeared upon the spot, to which they were attracted by the fierce and thundering ejaculations of their ducal master. They were astounded at what they beheld,—that master tearing away his wife from the arms of Bertram Vivian—the Duchess insensible—Bertram himself pale and quivering with excitement!

"Bear your mistress to the house," said the Duke sternly; "and consign her to the care of her maids."

The two female domestics hastened to obey the instructions thus given them; and as they bore away the inanimate form of Eliza, the Duke turned to follow.

"Uncle, for God's sake hear me!" cried Bertram, in a voice of most imploring agony, as he caught the Duke by the arm.

"Not a word, sir—not a single word!" vociferated the furious husband: and in his mad rage he struck his nephew a violent blow upon the temple.

The young man's countenance became crimson,—turning all in a moment from the whiteness of a sheet to the hue of a peony; and his first impulse was to avenge the blow. But not more quickly flashes the lightning through the air, than did the recollection glance in unto Bertram's mind that it was his uncle—a much older man than himself—who had thus struck him: and turning abruptly away, he rushed madly along the avenue. At the extremity thereof he encountered his brother, Lord Clandon.

"Bertram! for heaven's sake what is the matter?" exclaimed Hugh, with an air of amazement at his brother's fearfully excited looks and frenzied pace.

"Hugh," cried Bertram, stopping suddenly short, and addressing Lord Clandon in broken sentences; "something terrible has happened—terrible, terrible! Our uncle believes that Eliza is guilty——For God's sake go to him! assure him that on the oath of one who never yet was convicted of falsehood, she is innocent!——Dearest, dearest brother, save poor Eliza—save her, for God's sake!—no matter what may happen to me!"

"But what has occurred, Bertram? Tell me! speak!——You know that I will do anything I can to serve you——"

"The tale is too long to tell," hastily responded the younger brother; "and every moment is precious—precious as life itself! Go quick—see the Duke—swear to him that his wife is innocent! Go, Hugh—go, I beseech you!"

"But where can I see you again?" asked Lord Clandon quickly. "It is evident that you are in a state of excitement——"

"See me?" ejaculated Bertram, as if for a moment scarcely comprehending the question. "Yes, yes—I must see you again—I must receive the assurance that the Duke is satisfied! Where shall we meet? I dare not return——Come to me presently at the village-tavern: I will await you there."

"Be it so," rejoined Clandon rapidly. "I will do my best:"—and he hurried towards the mansion: while Bertram Vivian pursued his own frenzied, distracted course in the direction of the village about a mile distant.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE AVENGING HUSBAND.

Lord Clandon reached the house; and in the looks of the domestics whom he found in the hall, he beheld consternation and wonderment depicted. At the same instant the Duke of Marchmont came hastening down the staircase, crying in a loud voice, "Let Mrs. Bailey's carriage be got ready this moment! Hasten away, some of you, to give the orders!—let there be not a single instant lost unnecessarily!"

Three or four footmen scampered off to the stables to issue their master's commands; and the Duke, now perceiving Lord Clandon, walked straight up to him with sternly fierce looks, and said in tones of deep, concentrated rage, "Hugh, my happiness is wrecked through your accursed counsel!"

"For heaven's sake, my dear uncle," exclaimed Lord Clandon, "do not reproach me! Be just—be generous—as you have ever yet proved yourself."

"O Hugh, I am half mad!" murmured the Duke. "Forgive me—I wronged you! But come hither."

Thus speaking, he hurried his nephew into the nearest parlour; and when they were alone there together, he began pacing to and fro in the most violent agitation.

"My dear uncle, it kills me to behold you thus!" said Clandon, approaching his relative with an air of earnest sympathizing entreaty. "Tell me what I can do——"

"Nothing, nothing: my happiness is gone for ever! And yet," said the Duke, suddenly assuming a calmer aspect and a more dignified manner, "I ought not to torture myself thus for a vile woman and an infamous young man. Hugh, are you aware," he added, speaking as if through his set teeth, "that she whom I lately called my wife and loved as such, is unworthy of that name and of that love?"

"Alas! my dear uncle," responded Lord Clandon, "I met my unfortunate brother; and he——"

"Not a syllable, Hugh!" interrupted the Duke sternly, "not a syllable! I know your generous heart—I know how you love your brother: but if you dare plead for him, I quit the room this instant—or you shall quit the house for ever! I know that they will tell me they are innocent. Guilt always proclaims its innocence; and the more damning it is, the bolder is its effrontery. Hugh, not another word!"—and thus speaking, the Duke of Marchmont walked forth from the room.

Lord Clandon remained there for a few minutes after his uncle had left him; and then he hastily ascended towards the drawing-room. But on the landing he met Mrs. Bailey, who was descending from her own chamber, ready dressed as if for a journey.

"Oh, dear me, my lord," she said, quivering with a nervous trepidation: "what a dreadful thing! The Duke has ordered me to take Eliza away as soon as my travelling-carriage can be got in readiness——"

"And what else did he say?" asked Hugh eagerly.

"Nothing," responded Mrs. Bailey: "nor would he allow me to put in a single word. I hope, my lord, you have not told his Grace all that I said to you the other day?"

"Not for worlds, Mrs. Bailey!—not for worlds, my dear madam!" rejoined Clandon hastily. "And for heaven's sake, if the Duke questions you in any shape or form before you take your departure,—beware how you breathe a syllable of those circumstances which you mentioned to me!"

"I shall take very good care not to do that," answered the lady, still trembling with nervous agitation. "Oh, what a shocking thing!—and I who hadn't my smelling-bottle at the moment I heard of it!"

"Hush!—footsteps are ascending!" said Lord Clandon.

In a few moments the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance,—his demeanour now sternly and haughtily composed, but with an evidently forced rigidity of the features; and his countenance was ghastly pale.

"My dear madam," he said, approaching Mrs. Bailey and taking her hand, "I am grieved that it should become your duty, as my wife's only remaining relative upon her own side, to bear her away from a house which ceases to be her home. I thank you for the readiness with which you have complied with my request. Take the guilty woman with you: in a few days my solicitors shall communicate to you what my intentions are. Farewell, madam. Hugh, attend upon Mrs. Bailey to her carriage——and see that *she* accompanies her!"

With these words, the Duke was moving abruptly away,—when, as a thought struck him, he turned and said, "If she goes down upon her knees, Hugh, to entreat and implore that you will bring a conciliatory message to me, I command you, on pain of my unforgiving displeasure—on pain of my eternal wrath—to refuse compliance!"

He then passed into the nearest room, locking the door behind him; so that the quick turning of the key reached the ears of Mrs. Bailey and Lord Clandon, who remained upon the landing. In a few minutes one of Eliza's maids descended from above; and presenting a letter to Mrs. Bailey, said, "Her Grace entreats, ma'am, that you will hand this to the Duke."

"Indeed, poor soul," cried Mrs. Bailey, "I can do nothing of the sort: for the Duke will neither hear nor see anybody on her Grace's behalf. Unless indeed your lordship," she added, addressing Clandon, "would make one last effort——"

"Yes, yes—I will!" responded Hugh. "Yes—I will! It is a sacred duty—and even though I risk my uncle's displeasure, I will perform it."

He took the letter, and hastened to knock at the door of the apartment in which the Duke had shut himself. His Grace demanded from within who it was; and when Lord Clandon answered, the door was at once opened. The uncle and nephew remained closeted there together for about ten minutes, while Mrs. Bailey and the lady's-maid waited on the landing.

"How is her Grace now?" inquired the former:

"and why was it she begged I would not come into her room a little while back?"

"Her Grace, ma'am," replied the maid, with a saddened countenance, "looks as if she were ten years older than she was an hour back. But it was with a strange calmness she sat herself down to write that letter which Lord Clandon has so kindly taken in to the Duke. Heaven send that its contents may move his Grace! It was only because my poor mistress was occupied on that letter, that she could not see you. Oh! ma'am, her Grace may have been weak and imprudent—but it is hard to believe her guilty!"

Mrs. Bailey,—being well acquainted with all Eliza's earlier history, and knowing how deeply she had loved Bertram—besides being a woman whose notions of the better side of humanity had been warped, if not actually spoilt by the frivolities of fashionable life,—really did believe in her own heart that Eliza was completely guilty; and she could not help shaking her head ominously in response to the maid's expressed doubt on the subject. The countenance of the maid herself therefore fell suddenly as she beheld that look; and her own previously wavering opinion settled into a conviction unfavourable to the unfortunate Eliza.

At this moment Lord Clandon came forth from the apartment, where he had been closeted with the Duke; and his looks showed that his mission had proved unsuccessful.

"His Grace read the letter," he said, in a low deep voice. "After much trouble I persuaded him that *this* was at least an act of justice which he owed towards the Duchess. But his opinion is not to be moved—nor his resolve shaken. His commands are that with the least possible delay the Duchess is to leave the house."

The maid, with a sorrowful countenance, ascended the stairs, followed by Mrs. Bailey; and they entered the boudoir, where Eliza was pacing to and fro in a state of mind which may be more readily imagined than described. Another of her maids had remained with her; and this one was standing aside, following with mournful looks the form of her mistress as she thus paced to and fro. Eliza did indeed seem as if she had received a most fearful shock: her countenance was pale as death—her eyes were haggard—her look was as careworn as if she had passed through a dozen years of unceasing, ineffable sorrow. The instant the door opened, her eyes, glistening feverishly with uneasiness and suspense, were flung upon those who entered; and Mrs. Bailey hastening forward, said, "O Eliza, how could you——"

"Madam," interrupted the Duchess, all her trepidation settling down in a moment into the most dignified calmness,—"I see that you believe me guilty: but I am innocent!"

"Well, my dear," answered Mrs. Bailey, "I most sincerely hope you are—but of course you know best."

"My letter, Jane?" said the Duchess, turning proudly and indignantly away from her relative, and addressing herself to the maid who had followed Mrs. Bailey into the room: "has it been sent to his Grace?"—and now again there was the feverish glitter of suspense in her eyes as she awaited the response.

"The Duke," Mrs. Bailey hastened to interject, "positively forbade any one to bring him either letter or message; and he locked himself in a room——"

"My letter, Jane?" ejaculated the Duchess, now quivering visibly with impatience—but disdaining to take any farther notice of Mrs. Bailey, since this lady had shown that she believed in her guilt.

"Please your Grace," answered Jane, "Lord Clandon kindly took charge of the letter—his lordship was very much affected—and he was closeted with his Grace for nearly a quarter of an hour. But, my lady——"

"Enough, Jane!" said the Duchess, her marble features suddenly becoming fixed and rigid in the last stage of despair. "I understand you. The Duke believes me not. I therefore leave his house at once. But before I go, let me call God to witness that if I have been thoughtless—if I have been weak—if I have been imprudent—I have not been guilty!"

"O Eliza—my dear Eliza!" said Mrs. Bailey, still full of a nervous trepidation; "pray don't call God's name in vain!"

"Woman!" ejaculated Eliza fiercely, as she turned abruptly round upon her relative; "do you dare stand forward as my accuser?"—then, as Mrs. Bailey staggered back, frightened and aghast, the Duchess went on to say, "I will not accept a home from you! You cannot lay your hand upon your heart and say that you are sensible of no wrongs towards me. You know what I mean! I could curse you, were it not that I should involve the memory of my deceased parent in the same frightful malediction. If I were guilty——but God is my witness that I am not——how much of that guilt would be attributable to your detestable machinations! Begone!—remain not here another moment in my presence!"

Mrs. Bailey,—frightened to death lest Eliza should enter into the fullest explanations relative to the past, and thereby seriously compromise her,—hurried from the room, and rushed down stairs in a condition of bewildered terror.

"Where is the Duchess?" asked Lord Clandon: but as Mrs. Bailey sped past him, not knowing what she was about, he hurried after her. "Do tell me, my dear madam," he continued, in a voice full of anxiety and uneasiness; "what has occurred?"

"Don't ask me, my lord! don't ask me, I beseech you!" she ejaculated. "To be abused, and reviled, and taunted, after I helped to make her a Duchess—it is perfectly shocking!"

"Shocking indeed," said Lord Clandon, who was now enabled to comprehend pretty well what had taken place. "But are you going without her?" he asked, as Mrs. Bailey rushed through the hall to her carriage, which was waiting at the entrance.

"Yes, my lord!—pray let me go! I can assure you I have had quite enough of Oaklands."

"But the Duke's commands are that you should take the Duchess with you."

"The Duchess will not come—and thank heaven that she won't!" rejoined Mrs. Bailey, who was all in a flutter of mingled anger and affright; and without even waiting to be handed to the carriage, she scrambled up into it as best she could.

Lord Clandon bowed courteously — and the

equipage drove away. Then he stood irresolute for a few moments how to act. Mrs. Bailey had taken her departure, leaving the Duchess behind; and the Duke's orders were consequently disobeyed. Hugh decided, after a short deliberation with himself, upon ascending to his uncle's apartment to obtain farther instructions.

Let us now see what in the meanwhile had taken place in Eliza's chamber. So soon as Mrs. Bailey had fled thence in the manner already described, the Duchess of Marchmont, sinking down from her temporary excitement, into that blank, dead, unnatural calmness which indicated utter despair,—said to her maids, "Give me my bonnet—my shawl—my gloves—and I will take my departure."

"Shall I order a carriage for your Grace?" inquired Jane, adown whose cheeks the tears were trickling, although in her heart she believed the Duchess guilty notwithstanding her solemn protestations to the contrary.

"No," answered Eliza: "I will depart on foot. Portionless and penniless was I received as a wife: portionless and penniless will I go forth as a discarded and branded creature."

The two maids threw themselves weeping at Eliza's feet, conjuring her not to carry this resolve into execution: but she was firm—and in that very firmness she issued her commands in a voice that seemed more than decisive: it was even stern. The maids rose, and in profound silence gave her the things she asked for. When she was dressed for departure, her looks softened towards them; and she said in a tremulous voice, "Your kindness, my dear girls, touches me deeply: for, Oh! this is indeed a trial in the midst of which such kindness is to be felt. Farewell! Trouble not yourselves for me. Remain here until you are sought out and questions are put to you as to the mode of my departure. Then say that as I brought nothing with me of my own when the Duke took me as a wife, so I bear nothing away with me. Tell him likewise that in my writing-desk he will find the papers to which I alluded in the letter just now sent him. And once again, farewell."

With these last words—and not trusting herself to fling another look upon the two weeping damsels—the Duchess abruptly quitted the chamber. Seeking the private staircase, she descended it quickly, and passed out of the side-door into the grounds. No one observed her egress: and the two maids remained together in the chamber, weeping bitterly at the mournful circumstances under which they were thus suddenly deprived of a mistress whom they loved, and whose conduct had been uniformly kind towards them.

Meanwhile Lord Clandon, as the reader will recollect, had returned to the apartment wherein the Duke had locked himself,—his nephew's object now being to report that Mrs. Bailey had gone without the Duchess, and to obtain farther instructions. In about ten minutes Lord Clandon issued forth again; and summoning a footman, desired him to go and give immediate instructions to have the plain chariot gotten in readiness. He then ascended to the room which Eliza had so recently left—and knocked gently at the door. The summons was at once answered by Jane, down whose cheeks the tears of affliction were still flowing fast.

"I wish to speak a few words to her Grace," said Clandon, the expression of whose countenance was deeply mournful.

"Her Grace, my lord, is gone," answered Jane, sobbing violently.

"Gone?" ejaculated Clandon, in astonishment. "What mean you? No equipage has departed——"

"Her Grace would not have a carriage," rejoined the lady's-maid: "she is gone away on foot."

"On foot?" echoed Clandon, with continued amazement. "But where? whither? What purpose has her Grace in view?"

"All this, my lord, I know not," answered Jane. "Her Grace bade us farewell—and departed, as I have told you."

Lord Clandon descended the stairs slowly, and in profound mental deliberation. Again he knocked at the door of the apartment in which the Duke had shut himself: but this time the key turned not in the lock. From within however the Duke demanded in a voice which sounded irritable and stern, "Who is it? Wherefore am I thus incessantly disturbed?"

"It is I, uncle," answered Lord Clandon. "Her Grace has taken her departure——"

"Enough! Trouble me no more! Leave me, I insist!" exclaimed the Duke from within. "Give orders, Hugh, that no one comes to me. I would be alone—entirely alone!"

Lord Clandon dared not speak another word; and hastening away from the door, he was about to summon a domestic, when he beheld his own valet Travers ascending the stairs.

"Go and counter-order the travelling-carriage," said Clandon, "which a few minutes back I commanded to be got in readiness."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet: and he hurried off to execute his master's instructions.

It was now six o'clock in the evening; and the guests were all grouped in the drawing-room, discussing in whispers as much as they knew of what had taken place. Some were suggesting the propriety of immediately ordering their carriages and taking their departure, as their presence under existing circumstances might be regarded as an indelicate intrusion. But others recommended that no precipitate steps should be taken, as after all it might transpire that the Duchess had been wrongly judged, and a complete reconciliation might take place between herself and the Duke: for they knew not that Eliza had already left Oaklands.

In the midst of these whisperings, Lord Clandon entered the drawing-room; and the guests perceived at once by his countenance that something terribly decisive had taken place. He expressed his regret that anything should have occurred to mar the pleasure which had hitherto prevailed at the mansion; and he delicately yet plainly intimated that an irreparable breach had arisen between his uncle and the Duchess—that the latter had left the mansion—and that the former, overwhelmed with affliction, had shut himself up in the solitude of his apartment. The guests longed to hear more explicit details: but good taste prevented them from putting any questions; and they now saw that there was nothing for them to do but to order their carriages and separate

to their respective homes. As a matter of courtesy, Lord Clandon requested them to wait for dinner, which would be shortly served up: but this, under the circumstances, was a mere ceremonial act of politeness, which was of course declined. Immediate orders were issued to have trunks packed up and carriages gotten in readiness: the commands were promptly obeyed—and by seven o'clock on this memorable evening the guests had all taken their departure.

Lord Clandon now hurried off towards the village where he had promised to meet his brother, and which was about a mile distant. Less than a quarter of an hour's rapid walk brought him to the tavern in the village; and on inquiring for the Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian, he was at once shown into the little parlour where his brother, with feverish anxiety and harrowing suspense, was awaiting his arrival. Very nearly three hours had elapsed since they parted in the grounds of the mansion, and when Bertram so passionately implored Hugh to hasten away and assure their uncle of his wife's innocence. During this interval, which had seemed an entire age, the unfortunate Bertram had endured agonies of mind which, if spread over whole centuries, and portioned out as the lot of millions of human beings, would even thus in each infinitesimal part have been excruciatingly intolerable—but which, when condensed into the space of three hours, and aggregated as the burden which a single individual had to bear, were overpowering and soul-crushing beyond the capacity of language to describe. The first glance which Lord Clandon threw upon his brother, as he entered the little parlour of the village inn, showed him how fearfully Bertram must have suffered.

"What tidings, Hugh?" inquired Bertram, literally gasping with the fever of suspense, and with the horrible misgivings which Lord Clandon's melancholy expression of countenance was but too well calculated to inspire.

"Alas! nothing good," was the elder brother's response.

"Nothing good!" murmured the unhappy Bertram, his features indicative of despair. "But what has occurred? Tell me, Hugh!" he exclaimed, with feverish haste. "Did you assure our uncle——"

"My dear Bertram," rejoined Lord Clandon, taking his brother's hand and pressing it, "I did all that I could—but in vain!"

"And my letter?" cried Bertram: "has not the Duke had my letter?"

"Your letter?" exclaimed Clandon, in astonishment.

"But now I bethink me," Bertram went on to say rapidly, "it could not have reached the house before you must have left. I despatched it by a boy half-an-hour back. I was mad—frenzied—goaded to desperation! The time was passing, and you came not——I knew not what to do——my anxiety was intolerable——"

"And what said you to the Duke in your letter?" asked Lord Clandon.

"I scarcely recollect," replied Bertram. "I tell you that I was mad when I wrote it——I am mad still! My God, and she innocent! But where is she, Hugh? what has become of her?"

"She has left Oaklands," answered Lord Clandon. "First of all she was to depart with Mrs. Bailey——"

"And she has left?" exclaimed Bertram wildly: "she has left? She has lost her home—she who is innocent! Oh, wretch that I am!—it is I that have caused this fearful havoc of feelings—this frightful desolation of circumstances!"—and the miserable young man wrung his hands bitterly. "But she has left, you say?" he almost immediately added. "Whither has she gone?"

"I know not," responded Clandon. "Mrs. Bailey departed without her; and the unfortunate Eliza quitted the house on foot—alone——"

"Good heavens! is this possible?" ejaculated Bertram: and the wildness of frenzy was in his eyes. "Eliza gone forth alone—unattended—on foot——an outcast—a wanderer! Oh, it is intolerable!"—and snatching up his hat, he rushed madly to the door.

"Whither would you go, Bertram?" cried Lord Clandon, seizing his brother forcibly by the arm to hold him back.

"Whither would I go?" ejaculated the almost maddened young man. "To find her whom my insensate passion has ruined! to console her, if consolation be possible—to implore her pardon—to adopt means to prove her innocence——"

"But, Bertram——"

"Detain me not, Hugh! detain me not!"—and thus speaking with increasing frenzy of feelings and rabid vehemence of manner, Bertram rushed forth from the village inn.

Lord Clandon hurried out to the threshold of the front door: but his brother had already disappeared from his view.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CATASTROPHE.

About a quarter of an hour after Lord Clandon had left the mansion to keep his appointment with Bertram, a letter, addressed to the Duke of Marchmont, was brought by a boy and delivered to the hall-porter. The boy, who was already paid for his trouble, tarried not for any farther recompense—but hurried away the moment he had acquitted himself of his commission. That was the letter which Bertram had sent: but the address on the outside, as well as the contents within, were written in a hand so changed by the violent agitation of the writer, that no one, however familiar with his usual style of penmanship, would for a moment have suspected that it was his own. The hall-porter gave the letter to a footman,—who, proceeding up-stairs, knocked at the door of the apartment in which the Duke of Marchmont still remained.

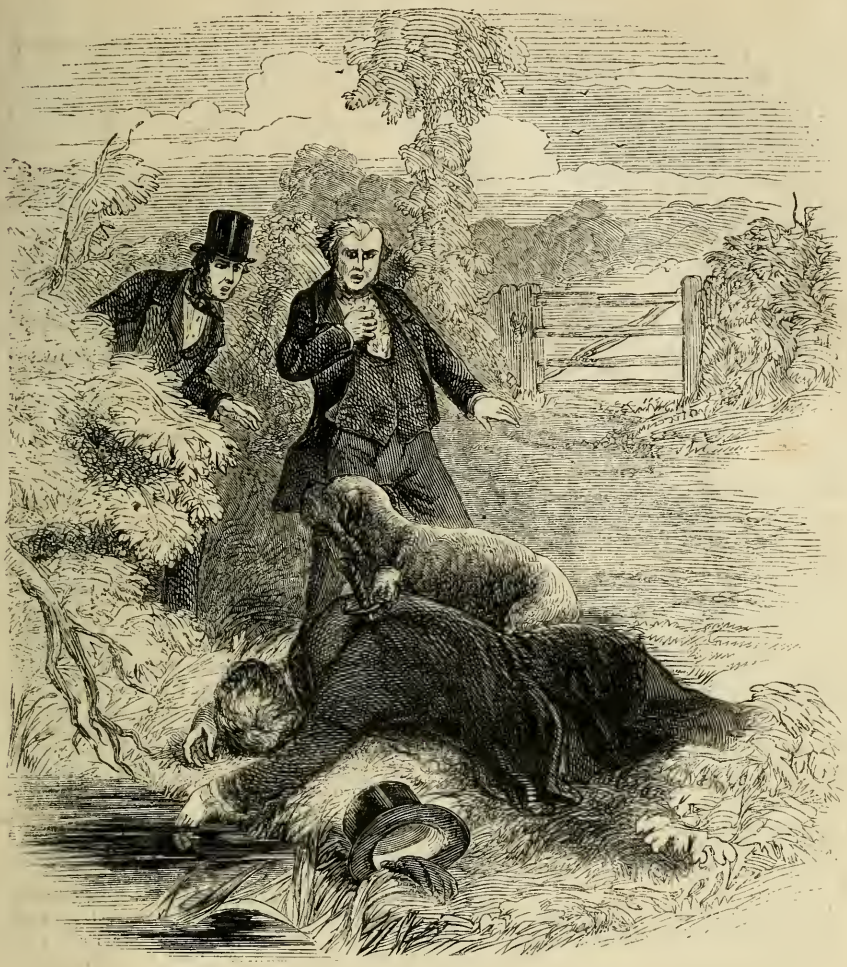
"Who is there?" demanded the nobleman from within; and his voice was half stern, half passionate. "I expressly ordered——"

"A letter, my lord," responded the footman, trembling with alarm.

"From whom?" demanded the Duke.

"I know not, my lord," rejoined the domestic. "It is in a strange hand——"

The Duke opened the door, and received the letter. The footman, as he caught a momentary



glimpse of his master's countenance, saw that it was deadly pale, with the traces of all strongly wrought feelings upon it. Hastily closing the door again, the Duke looked at the address; and not recognising the writing, opened the letter: but the instant his eye settled on the first words of its contents, he dashed it upon the carpet, and trampled it under foot. Ashamed of himself, the very next instant, for this impotent manifestation of vindictive fury, the Duke of Marchmont picked the letter up; and prompted by an irresistible feeling of curiosity to see what Bertram could possibly have to adduce in the face of evidence which his Grace regarded as so decisive, he sat down and read the letter through. It consisted chiefly of broken sentences, solemn oaths, sacred adjurations, —all attesting the innocence of the Duchess; and there were some incoherent allusions to a long-existing love between them, as well as to a cruel deception practised by her deceased father and Mrs. Bailey in order to make her the Duke's wife; so that a gleam of light began to dawn in unto the comprehension of Eliza's husband.

"Good heavens!" he said to himself, with a feeling of horror at the lengths to which he had gone, "if it be indeed true that in a moment of weakness, and under the influence of sorrow's agony at the idea of parting, Bertram should have caught her in his arms, but that she was innocent! Yet no—I cannot think it! I was prepared for protestations of innocence; and I even said that the deeper the guilt, the more impassioned its denial. No, no: they are guilty—this viper of a nephew—that wanton of a woman! But their love of other times—and that deception practised on her——"

And the Duke was staggered. He pressed his hand to his brow: he would have given worlds to discover that the wife whom he had loved so fondly, and of whom he had been so proud, was

really innocent: his soul yearned to think her so—his heart bled at the idea of its possibility, and at his own implacable harshness. An idea struck him. He went forth from the room, and inquired for Lord Clandon: but he was informed that Hugh had gone out a little time previously. Then the Duke ordered Jane, her Grace's principal lady's-maid, to be sent to him in the drawing-room. During the few minutes which elapsed ere the young woman made her appearance, the Duke of Marchmont composed his looks into an expression of cold and severe dignity: for he was too proud to display before others all he felt.

"Jane," he said, as the maid entered the room with a sorrowful countenance, and with the traces of weeping still upon it, "your mistress has taken her departure?"

"Yes, my lord," was the response. "Her Grace was very, very unhappy——"

"And whither has she gone?" interrupted the Duke.

"I know not, my lord."

"But the instructions she gave to the coachman? You doubtless attended her to the carriage——"

"My lord," rejoined the maid, tears bursting forth afresh, "her Grace went away on foot."

"On foot?" cried the nobleman, in astonishment.

"Yes, my lord," continued Jane. "Her Grace said that she came to you without a carriage, and she would go away as portionless——"

"Ah!" murmured the Duke: and then his eyes were earnestly fixed upon the maid, as if his soul experienced an avidity for whatsoever words of explanation might next come from her lips.

"Her Grace called God to witness her innocence," proceeded the maid. "Ah, my lord! it would be a shocking thing to fancy that human nature is so bad to take such an oath——"

But the young woman stopped short: for she recollected Mrs. Bailey's words and manner—and she trembled at the idea of pledging herself to a belief in the innocence of one who might after all be guilty.

"And what else did the Duchess say?" demanded the Duke, with the petulance of feverish impatience.

"Her Grace bade me tell your lordship," responded Jane, "that you would find in her writing-desk the several documents to which her letter to your Grace made allusion—I mean the letter which Lord Clandon was good enough to take in to your Grace."

"Ah, that letter! I did not——But no matter!" and the Duke hastened abruptly from the room.

He ascended to his wife's boudoir: he found the writing-desk—he knew it to be the one which her father had left behind him, and which he himself had placed in Eliza's hands a short time after the funeral. It was unlocked: for the Duchess had purposely left it so. The Duke drew forth its contents; and Bertram's letters to the late Captain Lacey, which he found therein, gave him a complete insight into all those bygone matters to which his unhappy young nephew's agitated communication from the village had merely made rapid and almost incoherent allusions.

The Duke was astounded: a veil fell from his eyes—and in a moment he comprehended the real meaning of that strange conduct which Bertram and Eliza had observed towards each other during the first few days of the young gentleman's visit to Oaklands. And he, the Duke, had purposely thrown them together! he had studied to place them on a friendly footing! Ah, if he were dishonoured, he had indeed, though unconsciously, been the author of that dishonour. But what in his heart he had for the last quarter of an hour been wishing, and yearning, and craving might come to pass, he now more than half believed. Was it not indeed possible—nay, more, was it not probable, that Eliza had been only weak, not guilty—and that Bertram's vindication was true, when it declared that under the influence of irrepressible feelings—not being at the moment master of himself—he had caught her in his arms? The longer the Duke thought of this, the more was he inclined to put faith in Bertram's statement. The very circumstances attending the departure of his wife, as he had just heard them from Jane's lips, seemed to be tinctured with a dignity far more compatible with conscious innocence than with a sense of guilt.

"O Eliza! O Eliza!" groaned the unhappy Duke, in the mingled anguish and reviving fondness of his heart; "if I have wronged you——good heavens, if I have wronged you! And that I have, I fear——nay, I am well nigh convinced. You sought not to be on intimate terms with Bertram; you were cold and distant towards him. Your demeanour was, under all circumstances, that which it ought to have been. And I threw you together—I forced you into each other's society—I left you alone together!——Ah! it was natural you should speak of the past—victims that you had both been made to a hideous deception! Yes, Eliza, you are innocent! Your weakness I forgive—you shall come to my arms again—and it is I who will on my knees sue at your feet for pardon!"

The Duke rushed forth from the boudoir in a state of mind bordering on frenzy. All his habitual dignity was forgotten—all his wonted pride was as naught, under the influence of the strong feelings which now possessed him. He reached the landing whence the drawing-room opened: and there he abruptly encountered Lord Clandon, who had just hurried back from the village after the interview with his brother.

"Ah!" ejaculated the Duke, as if the presence of his elder nephew suddenly reminded him of things which, in the previous whirl of his conflicting, distracting thoughts, he had utterly lost sight of. "Come hither:"—and the Duke abruptly passed into the drawing-room, followed by Lord Clandon.

Their interview did not last above ten minutes: but what its nature was, we have at present no means of describing. Suffice it to say that at the expiration of this brief interview, the door opened as abruptly as when the Duke entered that room;—and his Grace came forth. Descending to the hall, he said in a quick excited manner to the lacqueys, whom he found there, "Let all the male domestics disperse themselves over the neighbourhood, in search of the Duchess. If her Grace be found, tell her that I—her husband—have wronged her——"

Ejaculations of joy burst forth from the lips of

all who had heard this announcement of Eliza's innocence: for her natural goodness and her affably condescending manners had endeared her to the entire household of which she was so late the mistress.

"Yes," continued the Duke, his voice swelling with the excitement of his feelings, "let her Grace be told that I have wronged her—that I beseech her to return—and that she will be received with open arms! Disperse yourselves all about—enter every house, cottage, or hut, where it is possible that your mistress may have taken refuge. Depart, I say—and a hundred guineas for him who finds her ladyship! I also shall go forth in the hope of discovering my wrongly banished wife!"

Having thus spoken, the Duke of Marchmont put on his hat and rushed forth from the mansion. As he descended the steps, his favourite dog—a great bull-mastiff, which has been before alluded to—came leaping up in joy at beholding its master.

"Come, Pluto!" exclaimed the Duke. "You seem to understand, faithful dog, that I am bent on something of importance!"

Meanwhile the word had been passed rapidly through the mansion that, by some means or another, the Duke had become convinced of the innocence of the Duchess—that her Grace was to be sought out—and that a hundred guineas would be the reward of him who might discover her retreat. To no hearts did this announcement carry a more real joy, than to those of the two lady's-maids; and Jane, embracing her fellow-servant, murmured, with tears of happiness streaming down her cheeks, "She will return to us—our beloved mistress will return to us! God forgive me for having suspected her!"

All the male servants of the household sallied forth, and dispersed themselves about in every direction, in search of the Duchess. Lord Clandon likewise hastened on the mission,—vowing that he would add fifty guineas to the sum already promised by his uncle as the reward of the successful searcher.

The shades of evening had already begun to gather over the earth before this expedition was undertaken: but when night came, the moon appeared upon the canopy of heaven, in company with myriads of glimmering stars. Hours passed—but no one returned from the search until after midnight. Then, one by one, the domestics began to re-appear at Oaklands; and each successive arrival was accompanied by the announcement of non-success. It was near one o'clock in the morning when Lord Clandon came back: he likewise had to intimate failure. He inquired for the Duke: but his Grace had not yet re-appeared; and Lord Clandon resolved to sit up for his return.

It was one o'clock when the Duke of Marchmont, followed by his faithful dog, reached his mansion again. His inquiries had been as fruitless as those of all the others: indeed not the slightest intelligence was obtained by any one relative to the Duchess. A horrible idea seemed to pervade the generality of the household,—to the effect that she had committed suicide: but no one ventured to breathe such a surmise to the Duke—and it did not appear that he entertained it. Perchance he knew Eliza's natural firmness of character too well, to suspect for a moment that she could have perpetrated self-destruction—especially because, if really innocent—as he now felt convinced she was—she would cling to existence in the hope that her guiltlessness might be made apparent and the stain wiped away from her character.

"I shall go forth again," said the Duke to his domestics, who were assembled in the hall: "my weary limbs shall not press a couch this night, unless I obtain some clue to the retreat of the Duchess."

Then he questioned the domestics, one after the other, as to the particular neighbourhoods in which they had been; and it resulted that there was a little hamlet about two miles distant which was left unvisited.

"Thither will I go," said the Duke, hope appearing upon his countenance.

Several of the domestics volunteered to accompany his Grace; while all the others proposed to set off again and renew the search.

"No," said the Duke, thanking them all with a look, "you have done enough for to-night: it is my will that you retire to your chambers and seek the rest of which you all stand so much in need. If the morrow should dawn and no good intelligence have been in the interval obtained, we will adopt other means to accomplish our purpose. Go you therefore to your rooms."

"And you, my lord," interjected several voices, "stand in need of rest."

"No," responded the Duke: "I could not sleep, even if I sought my couch. I will go forth again. It is I who, alas! have done the mischief: it is my duty to effect its earliest reparation. Retire."

"Lord Clandon is sitting up," suggested one of the servants. "Shall I inform his lordship that your Grace is here?"

"No," responded the Duke imperatively: "I have not time for farther discourse. Retire to your chambers, I say—and I will go forth alone."

As he thus spoke, the Duke waved his hand in a manner which showed that he meant to be obeyed—though his looks again expressed thankfulness for the sympathy exhibited by his dependants. He went forth; and while the servants for the most part repaired at once to their chambers, others proceeded to secure the doors and shutters previously to seeking their own rooms: while Travers hastened to inform his master, Lord Clandon, of all that the Duke had said—for Travers was present in the hall during the brief scene which we have just described.

"His Grace should have suffered me to accompany him," exclaimed Lord Clandon: "he will weary himself to a degree that may bring on illness. But as it is, I shall retire to rest; and see that you call me early, Travers, so that I may get on horseback and renew the search after the Duchess."

Travers promised to obey his master's instructions; and having attended Lord Clandon to his chamber, proceeded to his own room a few minutes afterwards.

As early as six o'clock in the morning—and therefore after only a few hours' repose—the greater portion of the domestics were up and

dressed at Oaklands. Leachley, the Duke's valet, reported that his master had not as yet returned; and expressions of uneasiness passed from lip to lip. Several domestics meeting each other in the hall, were about to decide in which different directions they should issue forth—not merely in search of their lost mistress, but now likewise in search of their master also,—when a strange sound, like a low continuous moaning howl, coming from without, reached their ears. None of the doors of the mansion had as yet been opened: the hall-porter, an old man, having sat up so late, had overslept himself. The domestics listened—the sounds continued—and in a few moments they were interrupted by a bark, but low and feeble as the moaning howl itself had been.

"It is a dog!" ejaculated one.

"It is Pluto, I am almost certain!" cried another.

"Let us get the keys from the porter," exclaimed a third: and a general excitement prevailed; for the idea had arisen simultaneously in every mind that there was something wrong—but what it was, no one could conceive, and no conjecture was volunteered.

The keys were procured from the hall-porter's room: the front door was opened—and Pluto crawled painfully into the hall. He was feebly wagging his tail, as if in satisfaction at having thus obtained admittance at last: but he was bloodstained in several places—and his eyes, usually so bright and intelligent, were glazing as if in death. He carried something in his mouth; and on creeping into the hall, he did not sink down, though evidently in an exhausted, if not a dying state—but dragged himself painfully from the feet of one domestic to another. He looked up at each too, in a sort of piteously entreating manner: it was evident that if the faithful and intelligent animal had the power of speech, he would have told some tale.

"The poor dog has been wounded," ejaculated several voices; and looks of horror were exchanged: for the previous misgiving which had smitten the domestics, appeared all in a moment to have strengthened into the conviction that there had been some accident or foul play during the past night, and of which their master was the victim:—else wherefore had the dog come back alone?

"But what has he in his mouth?" asked one.

At this moment Lord Clandon, followed by Travers, made his appearance in the hall.

"Good heavens! what is the matter?" he exclaimed, the instant he caught sight of the wounded dog, who now sank down in utter exhaustion, its eyes closing apparently in death. "Where is the Duke?" inquired Clandon, as if smitten with the same terrible idea that had already seized upon the domestics.

"Oh! my lord, we know not," responded Leachley in a mournful voice: "but we dread——"

"What? the Duke has not returned!" ejaculated Clandon. "Oh, my poor uncle!"—and he seemed violently affected. "But what is that which has fallen from Pluto's mouth?"

"It is a piece of cloth," said one of the servants, stooping down and picking it up.

"Ah! evidently torn out of a coat," ejaculated another.

"Good heavens, what does all this mean?" exclaimed a third.

"Something dreadful, I fear," added Leachley, with a shudder.

"Disperse yourselves in every direction!" exclaimed Lord Clandon, powerfully excited. "I will take horse and gallop along the main roads. Travers——Travers, I say! Why, the fellow was here a few moments back!"

Travers was not however in the hall at this moment: and Lord Clandon hastened up to his own chamber, where he found his valet.

The orders he had given to the servants were promptly obeyed: for they scattered themselves in every direction—some singly, others going two together. A horse was presently saddled for the use of Lord Clandon, who was speedily ready to avail himself of it.

The butler and Leachley, the Duke's own valet, went together on the exciting expedition; and they took the road leading to that hamlet which the Duke had set out to visit, as he had stated to the domestics in the middle of the night. It was, as already stated, two miles distant from the mansion; but Leachley and the butler had not proceeded above a few hundred yards, when they heard a dragging noise and a panting, gasping, moaning sound behind. They turned—and beheld the wounded dog. The poor animal, having been forgotten in the hall when the domestics dispersed in such excitement at Lord Clandon's bidding, had dragged himself forth—for he was not quite so near death as his exhausted condition and glazing eyes had seemed to indicate.

"Poor Pluto," said Leachley, caressing the faithful dog.

"See how he looks up," exclaimed the butler, "as if asking us to come on."

"Yes—there is some meaning in those eyes—in those half moaning, half howling sounds!"

"Let us speed onward," said the butler.

The dog now kept in advance: it appeared as if he acquired strength as he went on—as if he were conscious of having some special task to perform, for which all his best energies were put forth. But still continued that prolonged wailing howl—that lugubrious moan which sounded ominous as a death-knell itself on the ears of the butler and Leachley.

On they went—and in proportion as they advanced, Pluto's pace quickened—his moan became more rueful—he kept looking up at the two domestics, as if entreating them to follow on still and not go back. They themselves experienced the appalled sense of men who felt that every step they took was bringing them nearer and nearer to the solution of some horrible mystery. Presently Pluto dashed forward, round a bend in the road—looked back for an instant to see whether the men were following him—and then disappeared from their view.

But a few instants brought the butler and Leachley round that bend—and they at once descried a dark object on the edge of a pond by the road side. Pluto, moaning and whining with all the plaintiveness of a human voice, was crouching near that object. A few instants more—and the two domestics reached the spot. Then what a frightful spectacle met their view! Their master, the Duke of Marchmont, lay dead before their

eyes—foully murdered. A dagger, with which the deed was accomplished, remained between the shoulders, where it had been driven deep down. The unfortunate nobleman lay upon his face on the edge of the pond, into the stagnant water of which one of his arms hung down.

For a few moments the butler and Leachley were so horrified at this frightful spectacle, that they were riveted in powerlessness to the spot: but recovering their self-possession after a brief interval, they raised the corpse. Life was extinct: the Duke's countenance was cold as marble: he had evidently been several hours dead.

"Alas, he is no more!" murmured Leachley, tears starting from his eyes.

"No more!" added the butler solemnly: and they gently laid the corpse down again.

And now followed a most affecting scene. The faithful dog had seemed to watch the countenances of the two men, while they raised and sustained the corpse between them,—as if the animal itself entertained some instinctive hope that they might be enabled to recall their master to life. But when their looks told the worst, and those brief sentences were exchanged, Pluto gave one long, low, whining moan—a subdued lugubrious death-howl —and sank down dead by the side of the corpse.

This incident called forth fresh tears from the eyes of the two domestics. In a few minutes—after having surveyed the scene in mournful silence —Leachley drew forth the dagger, and wrapped it up in his pocket-handkerchief. Scarcely was this done, when the quick tramplings of a galloping horse reached their ears; and in a few moments Lord Clandon was upon the spot.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, throwing himself from the horse, and sinking upon his knees by the side of the corpse: "my poor uncle! What fatal accident——"

"Murder, my lord!" said the butler,—"a foul and diabolical murder."

"Murder!" echoed Clandon, starting up with horror depicted on his countenance. "But I behold no wound!"—for the corpse was now lying on its back.

"Here, my lord," said Leachley, "is the fatal weapon:"—and he produced the dagger from his kerchief.

"Bertram's!" cried Clandon, the instant his looks fell upon it.

"Mr. Bertram's?" ejaculated both of the domestics, with a simultaneous start of indescribable horror.

"Did I say Bertram's?" exclaimed Clandon. "No, no—I recall the word——Not for worlds would I impute——No, no—I did not say Bertram's!"

The two domestics exchanged looks of continued horror, but now blended with dismay and grief: for they both felt that Lord Clandon, having in the suddenness of agonized amazement let drop his brother's name in connexion with the dagger, was now generously seeking to recall the word, so as to save that brother from the dread imputation and its consequences.

"I will ride back to the house," said his lordship, "and procure assistance. But no—I should fall from the steed—I have not strength——Go, one of you! It is my duty to remain here, and watch over the corpse of my poor uncle."

Leachley, the deceased nobleman's valet, accordingly mounted the horse, and sped back to the mansion. Most of the male domestics were abroad, searching for their master and mistress: but some few, who had overslept themselves, were still at the house; and of course all the female servants were there. The intelligence which Leachley brought, was but too well calculated to overwhelm all who heard it with consternation and grief. A carriage was speedily gotten in readiness; and Leachley accompanied it back to the spot, where Lord Clandon and the butler had remained in charge of the corpse. This was now placed inside the vehicle, which returned at a mourning pace with its sad burthen to the mansion. It was not till the lapse of some hours that the domestics who had been on the search—including Travers, Lord Clandon's valet—came back to the mansion; and as they returned one by one, it was to hear the afflicting intelligence of the Duke's murder. We should not omit to observe that the remains of poor Pluto were likewise taken to the mansion; and when a veterinary surgeon had examined into the exact nature of the wound of which the faithful animal had died, the body was buried in the garden, in the midst of a parterre of flowers.

On the following day the County Coroner arrived at Oaklands, to hold an inquest over the corpse of the deceased Duke. A jury, consisting of tenant-farmers and of the principal householders of the village, was summoned for the occasion. The butler and Leachley deposed to the discovery of the corpse by the side of the pond. The dagger was produced; and Leachley,—being a conscientious man, and determined to do his duty, no matter at what sacrifice of his own feelings and those of others,—mentioned the circumstance of Lord Clandon's ejaculation of his brother's name the instant the fatal weapon met his eyes. The story in respect to the Duchess and Bertram had already got wind throughout the entire district: and thus the Coroner and Jury, in their own minds, naturally beheld in those incidents enough to strengthen the suspicion that the Duke's younger nephew was indeed the assassin.

Lord Clandon—or, as we ought now properly to style him, the Duke of Marchmont; for such indeed had his uncle's death made him—was compelled to appear before the Coroner. He entered the room where the inquest was held, with a deep sadness upon his countenance; and for the first few minutes his sobs were plainly audible. The Coroner expressed for himself and the Jury the grief which was experienced at enforcing his Grace's attendance under such distressing circumstances: but they intimated that they had a duty to perform, and that it must be accomplished.

The oath being administered to the new Duke of Marchmont the Coroner said, "I am about to put a question which, however painful it may be, your Grace is bound to answer on the sanctity of the oath you have just taken. Does your Grace know to whom this weapon belongs?"

"Am I indeed bound to answer such a question?" inquired Hugh; and he appeared to speak with the greatest difficulty, so that all present compassionated his afflicting position.

"Your Grace must answer," said the Coroner.

"Then if it be so," returned the Duke of Marchmout, in a scarcely audible voice, "I do know that the dagger was the property of—of my unfor——my brother."

"Whose Christian name is Bertram?" said the Coroner interrogatively.

The Duke of Marchmont bowed—groaned audibly—and covered his countenance with his hands.

"When, my lord," inquired the Coroner, after a pause, "did you last see your brother?"

"In the evening of the day before yesterday," responded the Duke,—"in the village of Oaklands."

"And in what state of mind was he at the time, my lord?" asked the Coroner.

"He was much excited," responded the Duke: "for circumstances had occurred——But doubtless the rumour has reached your ears? My poor brother protested his innocence——"

"And did your Grace leave him in the village?" asked the Coroner.

"No," returned Hugh. "I sought to comfort and console him: but when he learnt that the Duchess had left the mansion, he burst away from me in a sort of frenzy. Oh! I fear that his brain was turned—that madness had seized upon it—— But still—still I cannot bring myself to think for a moment that he would have been guilty of this crime!"

"We shall not trouble your Grace any farther," said the Coroner.

The Duke of Marchmont rose from his seat—bowed to the assemblage—and passed slowly from the room, followed by the sincerest sympathies of all present.

The landlord of the village inn was next examined as a witness. He deposed to the fact of Bertram having passed about three hours at the tavern in the afternoon and evening of the day preceding the night of the murder—that he was violently excited the whole time—and that he had rushed away in the frenzied state of which his brother had just spoken. Two of the housemaids belonging to the mansion, were next examined in succession; and their statement was to the effect that while arranging the chamber occupied by Bertram during his stay at Oaklands, they had seen the dagger lying amongst a few other curiosities, which, as they understood, Bertram had brought with him from the United States. The man-servant who had specially attended upon Bertram during his visit, was the next witness; and he deposed to the fact that Bertram had shown him the dagger, explaining at the time that it had been long in the possession of some celebrated Indian Chief who died a few months previous to Bertram's departure from Washington. The dagger, we should observe, was of very peculiar workmanship, and once seen, could not possibly have been mistaken.

Witnesses were now examined to relate the particulars in respect to the dog. It had been found that Pluto was mortally wounded by a pistol-bullet: but the weapon itself had not been found, either in the pond or in the neighbourhood—so that it was tolerably evident the assassin had taken it away with him. The cloth which the dog had brought in his mouth, was a fragment evidently torn from the skirt of a surtout coat; and it was therefore supposed that the faithful animal had flown at the murderer of his master—in doing which he had received the fatal bullet. It was farther shown that Bertram had on a black surtout coat when he left Oaklands after the scene with the Duke and Eliza.

The evidence being now complete, the Coroner proceeded to sum up. In alluding to the circumstance of the dagger, he said that it had been incontestibly proved that the weapon belonged to Bertram; and that the Jury, with this fact before them, would have to weigh well whether, under all the circumstances, it was Bertram's hand which committed the deed—or whether some other person had obtained possession of that dagger with the foulest of purposes. The Coroner remarked that it was certainly extraordinary that Bertram should have had the dagger about him at the time when he was walking with the Duchess and when the incident occurred that compelled him to fly from Oaklands. None of the witnesses had been able to throw any light upon this point,—such for instance as proving that the dagger was still in Bertram's room at the time of his flight—or on the other hand, that they missed it from the room. Certain it was the dagger had dealt the murderous blow; and it was for the Jury to say whether the hand of Bertram or that of an unknown assassin had wielded the weapon. Having commented upon all other parts of the evidence, the Coroner left the matter in the hands of the Jury.

The deliberation was not long; and its unanimous result was a verdict of "Wilful Murder against Bertram Vivian, now Lord Clandon."

When the tragic circumstances which thus occurred at Oaklands, became spread abroad over the United Kingdom by means of the public journals, the usual excitement lasted for a time—and then began to die away. Warrants were issued for Bertram's apprehension—a reward was offered by the Secretary of State—advertisements were inserted in the newspapers—but all to no effect: the accused was not to be found. And Eliza? Nothing was heard of her. The natural inference therefore was that Bertram and the Duchess of Marchmont had fled together to some far distant clime—there to enjoy their illicit love and to escape, the one from the odium, and the other from the consequences of the fearful deed of turpitude which had been committed.

CHAPTER X.

DUCAL RECEPTIONS.

EIGHTEEN years (within a few months) had elapsed since the tragic occurrences at Oaklands,—eighteen years, during which not the slightest intelligence had ever been received of the accused Bertram and the missing Eliza.

Hugh Duke of Marchmont was now in his forty-third year: and that interval had necessarily made some change in his personal appearance. His hair, of such jetty darkness when we first introduced him to our readers, was now undergoing its first change towards gray: harsh lines, telling of strong passions and of somewhat irregular pursuits, were traced upon his forehead and in the

corners of his eyes. His countenance was thin and pale—his features had grown angular—but their expression was that of a cold haughty severity.

He had married about two years after the tragedy at Oaklands suddenly put him in possession of the title and estates of Marchmont: but no issue had blessed the union. The lady whom the Duke had espoused, was a young creature of only sixteen at the time of the marriage; and fifteen years having elapsed since the solemnization of those nuptials, she was consequently now thirty-one. For some time the Duke had earnestly hoped to have an heir to his title and possessions: but as year after year passed and the hope remained unfulfilled, Hugh gradually conceived an aversion towards his young and beautiful wife. This aversion did not at first display itself in any overt acts towards the Duchess: but in proportion as it increased, the Duke grew all the less careful in concealing it—until the unfortunate Duchess could no longer blind herself to the growing indifference of her husband,—an indifference that was merging into downright hate. At last the Duke of Marchmont separated so far from his wife that they occupied distinct rooms,—though still continuing to live beneath the same roof, and preserving, when in society and before the world, all the outward decencies which husband and wife are bound to maintain towards each other. The Duchess was not the less virtually and in reality neglected,—the Duke seldom dining at home, but seeking his own pleasures in quarters that were most agreeable to him. Though he had been extravagant and improvident in the earlier part of his life, and was indeed overwhelmed with debts at the period he succeeded to the title and domains of Marchmont,—he had, since that accession, lived within his income: but then his income was ample enough to minister to all the wants and wishes of even the most pleasure-seeking individual.

The town-mansion occupied by the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont, was one of the handsomest and most extensive in Belgrave Square. It had lately been refurnished in a sumptuous manner: the picture-gallery contained some of the finest works of the old masters: all the appointments of the palatial residence were indicative of great wealth and a luxurious taste. Throughout the entire arrangements the voice of the Duke himself was autocratic,—the Duchess not being allowed to interfere. Neither did she seek to do so: her disposition was gentle, meek, and submissive: her lot was an unhappy one—but she endeavoured to bear it with all becoming resignation, and sedulously avoided the aggravation of its hardship by any manifestation of a will of her own in opposition to that of her imperious husband.

It was in the beginning of June, 1847, that the scene occurred which we are about to narrate. The time-piece in one of the elegantly furnished apartments at Marchmont House, had just proclaimed the hour of noon; and the Duke, who was alone there, laid aside the newspaper which he had been reading. He was sitting, or rather lounging upon a sofa: his person was wrapped in a handsome silk dressing gown of a rich pattern, with a cord tied loosely round the waist. He was thinking of the recreations he had proposed to himself and the appointments which he had for that day,—when a footman entered the room, announcing "Mr. Armytage."

An expression of annoyance swept for a moment over the countenance of the Duke of Marchmont: but it rapidly passed away, as if suppressed by his own strong will, because he did not choose to display it to the individual who was thus ushered into his presence. This individual was a man of about fifty—of middle stature, somewhat inclined to corpulency—and with a countenance that was far from prepossessing. It had a mean, cunning look—an expression of cold worldly-minded calculation, which evinced selfishness, love of gain, petty ambitions, and other low debasing feelings. Yet there was a certain gentility of manner about this person,—a gentility, however, which to the eye of a well-bred observer would seem to have been picked up from contact with his betters, rather than to be naturally his own. He was dressed with some degree of pretension—and at all events looked like a well-to-do individual in comfortable circumstances.

Advancing into the room, Mr. Armytage bowed, with a certain commingling of familiarity and respect, to the Duke of Marchmont,—who, without rising from his seat, merely nodded his head; and indicating a chair, inquired, "Well, Armytage, what has brought you hither this morning?"

"I come to consult your Grace," replied the visitor, "on a certain family matter which I have very much at heart, and on which I have been thinking for some little time past: so that at length I resolved to address myself to your lordship."

"A family matter?" ejaculated the Duke of Marchmont, in evident surprise. "What the deuce can you mean? This is the first time you ever thought of consulting me on such a subject; and really, Mr. Armytage, I should fancy that with your shrewdness you are the best possible person in the world to manage your own affairs."

"But sometimes, my Lord Duke," rejoined Armytage, "the best manager requires the assistance of—of——" he was evidently about to say "a friend"—but he substituted the term "an adviser."

"Well then, proceed," exclaimed the Duke: "for it is past mid-day, and I am not yet dressed to go out."

"Your Grace is aware," proceeded Armytage, "that my daughter Zoe is now in her twentieth year——"

"Ah! is she so old as that?" said the Duke, listlessly. "But as you are aware, I have seen her so seldom."

"It is perfectly true," replied Mr. Armytage, accentuating his words into the significancy of a reproach, "that your Grace seldom condescends to appear at my parties; and it is unfortunate that on several occasions for the last two or three years, when I solicited your Grace's presence, you always had prior engagements."

"Well, Armytage, that was not my fault, you know," responded Marchmont. "But about Miss Zoe?—you were speaking of her. She is a very beautiful girl——"

"And, I flatter myself, my lord," interjected Armytage, "that she is well brought up. I have spared no expense on her education and accomplishments——"

"I recollect that she plays and sings admirably," said the Duke. "But now, pray come to the purpose."

"I will explain myself in as few words as possible," continued Mr. Armytage. "Your Grace is aware that my poor wife, Zoe's mother, died when she was young; and it therefore devolved upon me to superintend my daughter's training and rearing. I am therefore proud of her, not merely as the personification of feminine beauty and accomplishments—but likewise as a specimen of my own good taste: I mean that the developments of her intellect do credit to the presiding influence——"

"Really, Armytage, you might leave others to sing your praises," interrupted the Duke, somewhat impatiently. "What in the devil's name is the use of your talking all this nonsense to me? Let it be taken for granted that your daughter is all you represent; and now tell me what service I can render you—for it *is* a service, I see plainly enough, that you have come to ask."

"My lord, I am solicitous for the welfare of my beloved and only child," returned Armytage. "To speak the truth with frankness, I have given the most brilliant parties ever since she *came out*, in the hope of procuring for her a suitable alliance. Several young noblemen are happy enough to feast themselves at my table and to flirt in my drawing-rooms: but, my lord, as yet not one——"

"Has paid his suit to your daughter," said the Duke, anticipating his visitor's meaning. "But what would you have me do? You don't for a minute imagine that I have it in my power to find a patrician husband for your daughter?"

"On the contrary, my lord, it is precisely what I do mean," said Mr. Armytage; "and I will tell you how. Your Grace is intimately acquainted with all those young noblemen who visit me——"

"No doubt!" interjected Marchmont: "because it was through me that you became acquainted with them."

"Precisely so, my lord," said Mr. Armytage. "They are your Grace's companions and friends—you meet them at your club—you ride with them—they visit you at your country-seats and at your shooting-box—they dine at your table—they are satellites revolving round your Grace as their central sun."

"Well, Armytage—and to what is all this to lead?" inquired the Duke.

"Simply to this, my lord,—that you have it in your power to hint to these noblemen that Mr. Armytage is a wealthy man—a very wealthy man—that by successful speculations he has amassed a considerable fortune——"

"The young noblemen to whom you allude, are aware of this already," observed the Duke.

"Yes, my lord: but they are not aware that I will give my daughter sixty thousand pounds on her wedding-day. Of course this is an announcement which I cannot blazon forth from the head of my dinner-table, nor in the midst of my drawing-room. Your Grace however can bring up the conversation, as if quite in an indifferent manner; and whatsoever hint your lordship may throw out in respect to my means and intentions of providing for my daughter, will assume for those who hear it, the shape of a recommendation to reflect seriously thereon. If the attention of the young noblemen to whom we are alluding, be once settled on that particular point——"

"Your aim will be soon accomplished, you think?" added the Duke. "Well, it may be so. But do you reflect, Armytage, that these young noblemen are for the most part younger sons—without much means of their own?"

"What matters their means," ejaculated Armytage, "when I possess ample? I would sooner bestow my daughter on a nobleman without a shilling, than on the richest commoner in all England."

"Really, if this be your game," observed the Duke of Marchmont, "I do not think it can be a very difficult one to be carried out successfully."

"Certainly not—if your Grace will only succour me to the extent I have been explaining," said Mr. Armytage. "May I rely——"

"Yes—certainly," responded the Duke. "I will take the very earliest opportunity of giving the hint which you have suggested. But what will Miss Zoe herself say if some fine morning you bid her receive the attentions of one whom she does not love?"

"Zoe, my lord—as a dutiful, an affectionate, and an obedient daughter," rejoined Mr. Armytage, sententiously, "will follow her father's advice in all things."

"And suppose that the whole is brought about according to your wishes," said the Duke, "you will not eventually throw upon me the blame of any mishaps that may arise—the squandering, for instance, of your daughter's dowry by the husband whom she may thus obtain——"

"*I*, my lord, will take care of all *that* in the marriage-settlements," replied Armytage quickly. "Suppose, for argument sake, that the noble suitor whom I seek for my daughter, should be hampered with debts. To a reasonable amount I will liquidate them; and I will guarantee a liberal income—say a thousand a year—for pocket-money and so forth, for my son-in-law. This, with the interest of my daughter's sixty thousand pounds, will yield a sufficient revenue; and the young people will have the prospect of double at my death. Is not this fair, my lord?"

"It is at least explicit," responded the Duke; "and as I see that you are so perseveringly bent on marrying your daughter to almost any one, so long as he possesses a title of nobility—I will, as already promised, do my best to help you in the matter."

"For this favour, and for all past ones, my lord," said Armytage, rising from his seat, "I beg to proffer my sincerest thanks."

He then bowed in the same half respectful half familiar manner as before—and quitted the room. As the door closed behind him, a sneering expression of contempt appeared upon the countenance of the Duke of Marchmont: but it was promptly succeeded by a darker scowl of anger and annoyance, at having been thus selected to play the ignominious part of a sort of helper-on for the ambitious schemings of the *parvenu* speculator, Mr. Armytage.

A few minutes after the departure of Mr. Armytage, and just as the Duke of Marchmont was about to proceed to his chamber to dress for going

ZOE.

out,—the door was again opened, and the footman announced Lord Octavian Meredith.

This was a young nobleman barely twenty-two years of age—exceedingly handsome—and of elegant appearance. He was not much above the average height: but his slenderness of shape and perfect symmetry of figure made him look taller than he really was. His hair, curling naturally, and worn somewhat profusely—was brown, but by no means of the darkest shade: his whiskers and a slight moustache added to the manliness of an otherwise youthful countenance. His features were in the Grecian style; his eyes, of dark blue, had all the clearness and brightness proper for the reflection of a soul naturally frank, candid, and generous. His manners were those of the polished gentleman,—with the slightest possible tincture of a dissipated languor—but without a real affectation. His voice was singularly pleasing—its tones rich and harmonious; and his conversation, which might be intellectual enough when he thought fit to render it so, received additional attractions from that melody of the voice. He was the youngest of the three sons of the Marquis of Penshurst. The Marquis himself was very rich, but excessively mean and parsimonious. The estates were strictly entailed upon his eldest son: the second son, though only six-and-twenty years of age, was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army: Octavian, the youngest of the three, and of whom we are specially speaking, had been intended for the Church: but for reasons which we will proceed to explain, he had renounced all thought of entering holy orders —nor had he indeed any profession at all.

Lord Octavian Meredith was naturally a well-principled young man, with a high sense of honour, and endowed with every ennobling sentiment as well as intellectual quality calculated to make him shine in the world. But he had been sent to College with a limited income; and yet, as the son of a Marquis, and himself bearing a patrician title, he was expected to keep up a certain appearance. All young men have their pride in these respects; and this pride frequently over-rules their better feelings. Parents should be particularly cautious to guard against the possibility of their children's good principles being assailed through the weak point of their pride: for no point is more vulnerable. Octavian found himself at College without adequate means to keep up a becoming appearance. He got into debt; and his sense of honour prompted him to meet his engagements according to the punctuality that was promised. He wrote to his father, frankly and candidly explaining his position. The Marquis, instead of treating his son with a kind consideration, sent his lawyer to Oxford to offer a composition to the creditors. The tradesmen remonstrated: the lawyer shrugged his shoulders, and told them they might do as they liked, but that they had better take what he offered than stand the chance of getting nothing at all—for that the Marquis of Penshurst was determined not to suffer his son, while a minor, to be fleeced by those who recklessly gave him credit. The tradesmen accepted the composition; and they were given to understand that no farther debts contracted by Lord Octavian, would be thus settled. Octavian was relieved from his embarrassments: but his position was ruined at the University. He obtained the nick-name of "the Bankrupt Lord:" the wealthiest of his companions cut him direct—the poorest looked coldly upon him. His situation became intolerable: he wrote to his father to beseech that he might be allowed to choose some other profession than that of the Church: the Marquis was obstinate in his refusal—and Lord Octavian left the University in humiliation and disgust.

His father refused to see him for some time; and at last when he consented, he upbraided the young man so bitterly and treated him with so much harshness that Octavian's home became as intolerable as his situation was at Oxford. In a few months' time he attained his twenty-first year; and he then requested his father to make him a fixed allowance. The penurious old Marquis sternly refused: his tyranny increased towards Octavian—who, it must in justice be said, did all he possibly could to merit a renewal of the paternal confidence. His mother had long been dead: otherwise he would have found a kind and considerate mediatrix in her. In short, it became impossible for him to tarry beneath his father's roof; and through the intervention of a distant relative, who happened to have some influence with the Marquis, Octavian procured an allowance of five hundred a year. Before he left home, he besought the Marquis to use his interest to get him a commission in the Army, or to launch him into the sphere of Diplomacy: but the old nobleman could not forget that his original plans on behalf of his youngest son had been thwarted by his withdrawal from the University;—and faithful to his churlish nature, he positively refused to do anything more for him.

Octavian accordingly quitted the paternal home, and took lodgings. He was but little past his majority; and his experiences of life were hitherto bitter enough. His spirit had been chafed—his feelings wounded—his hopes disappointed: he had the will, and he felt that he had the intelligence, to enter upon some career in which he might distinguish himself and carve out his own fortunes: but the opportunity had been denied him. This was indeed a bad beginning for a young man just entering upon the world,—sufficient to demoralize him completely—render him indifferent to the good principles which had hitherto for the most part guided him—and prepare the way for his eventual ruin. Octavian did not entirely escape the ill effects of those inauspicious circumstances. On taking lodgings, he was launched as it were upon the town; and his companions were men in his own sphere of life. He became a favourite with them: his obliging disposition, his polished manners, and his natural intelligence rendered him a desirable guest at their tables; while his own limited means compelled him to accept all these hospitalities as the only condition on which he could obtain any society at all. He was introduced to the Duke of Marchmont,—who, from the way in which he was situated with his wife, was fond of giving bachelor dinner-parties and of being surrounded with a number of gay, lively young men, as the reader might have gathered from certain remarks made by Mr. Armytage. Thrown into the midst of this society, Octavian gradually found himself being drawn deeper and deeper into the vortex of dissipation. He kept out of debt: but he could not avoid keeping late hours and joining in the pleasures which his com-

panions courted. To abstract himself from their company at an early hour when what they called "the joviality of the evening" was only just beginning—or to decline forming one of whatsoever party of pleasure might be in contemplation—would be to seal his own exclusion from those circles in future. What was Octavian to do? He felt that he was entering upon a dangerous career, and that his naturally good principles were already receiving certain shocks, each successive one being accompanied with less remorseful feelings than the former; and he yearned to escape from these evil influences. But how was he to do so? His mind, having been chafed and disappointed, was too unsettled and restless to enable him to sit down quietly in the midst of books; and it was not to be expected that a young man just entering into life, would fly to some distant seclusion and turn hermit. On every occasion when invited to dine with the Duke of Marchmont or any other of his friends, Octavian would hesitate what answer to send: he trembled to go, yet knew not how to refuse; and so he went, vowing it should be for the last time. But these "last times" really never reached the end, nor fulfilled their own meaning; and thus Lord Octavian Meredith—with the highest aspirations, and the best capacities for doing himself good—was being gradually and imperceptibly sucked into that vortex of dissipation which London life affords, and in which many a fine spirit, noble intellect, and magnanimous heart is wrecked and engulfed.

It has been necessary to give the reader this long description of a young nobleman who is destined to play no inconsiderable part upon the stage of our story; and he it now was who was ushered into the Duke of Marchmont's presence soon after Mr. Armytage had taken his departure.

"The very one whom at the instant I most longed to see!" exclaimed the Duke, cordially grasping Octavian's hand. "I was thinking of going for a good long ride: for to tell you the truth, I drank somewhat too much champagne last night——By the bye, you were not one of us at Lord Oxenden's?"

"No—I was at a party at Mr. Armytage's," replied Meredith.

"Ah! Armytage has just been here," said the Duke.

"I saw him driving away in his carriage," observed Octavian, "and bowed to him. But I wish, my dear Duke, you could give me half-an-hour of serious conversation—and then I will cheerfully accompany you in a ride."

"Serious conversation, my dear Meredith?" ejaculated Marchmont, with a laugh. "Are you really disposed to be serious? Come, shall we have luncheon? A glass of hock and some soda-water will do us good."

"Not now, I pray you," responded Meredith. "Give me the half-hour—and then I am at your bidding."

"Be it so—the half-hour of serious discourse," said the Duke: and he stretched himself indolently upon the sofa. "Now, Octavian, proceed: I am all attention."

"You know, my dear Duke," resumed the young nobleman, "how I am situated with my father——"

"Now, I will cut you short at once," interrupted Marchmont. "You have temporary need of a sum of money? Tell me without another word how much it is—and my cheque-book is at hand."

"No, my dear Duke—it is not *that*," replied Meredith, his looks expressing his gratitude for the offer. "Nevertheless, I did come to solicit a favour at your hands——It is that you will use your interest to procure me a diplomatic post. I have an inclination to go abroad——"

"Ridiculous, Octavian!" exclaimed the Duke: "we cannot spare you from amongst our own set. But seriously speaking, my dear friend, I have not the slightest interest with the present Ministry. You know that I belong to the good old school of Toryism: I always vote against the Government on principle: and if there were a shoe-black's situation to be given away, I might vainly ask for even so paltry a post for a nominee of my own."

"I feared that it would be so," observed Octavian, his handsome countenance becoming deeply overshadowed, and sorrow clouding his clear blue eyes.

"But what means this sudden resolve on your part?" inquired Marchmont,—"this anxiety to get abroad?"

"You have treated me with so much kindness, I will be frank with you," answered Octavian. "My means are limited—I am dependent on my father's caprice—I have no profession, no position—and I long to improve my circumstances in every respect."

"I understand," said the Duke; "and it is natural enough. But, Ah! my dear fellow, a thought strikes me! You know I do not flatter: but a young nobleman of your personal appearance, fine intellect, fascinating manners——You should marry!"

"Ah, marry!" said Octavian, with an ill-repressed sigh. "I have no fortune; and what father will consent to bestow his daughter, if she be an heiress, upon one so impoverished as I?"

"You under-rate your own merits," observed the Duke of Marchmont. "In matrimonial affairs there are such things as equivalents. Suppose, for instance, a young lady brings you a decent fortune, and you confer upon her the rank and title which she possesses not——"

"I know that things are managed in this way," observed Octavian slowly: "but to tell you the truth, it is a proceeding from which my pride recoils."

"Pride!" echoed the Duke. "The only sacrifice of pride that I can see, would be in the fact of you, a patrician, giving your hand to a plebeian."

"You of all men to talk in this way!" exclaimed Meredith, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Ah! you fancy that I am the proudest of the proud?" observed the Duke. "But I am looking to your interests——"

"And I candidly confess that the sacrifice of pride to which I alluded, is not precisely what you are thinking of. I meant to say," continued Lord Octavian, "that I should not like to be so much indebted to a wife for the enjoyment of a fortune. As for the distinctions between patricians and plebeians, you know very well that I am not such a Tory as yourself."

"Let us recur to my argument about equivalents," said the Duke. "If you give a title, and the lady brings a fortune, you make common stock of those elements which constitute social position and comfort: you are mutually indebted—and in that respect you stand on perfectly independent grounds towards each other."

"Admitting the force of your argument," observed Meredith,—"and supposing that I fell in with some young lady who, possessing a fortune, would accept me as her husband,—how could I tutor my heart to love her? and how could I marry her unless it did?"

"Oh! if you mean to throw love into the scale," ejaculated the Duke, almost contemptuously, "I must retreat from the argument. I only undertake to advise you how to obtain a settled position: I cannot compose philters that will engender love. Perhaps, my dear Meredith, you love already?"

"I know not," responded Octavian, with some degree of confusion. "And yet methinks that the image of one whom I have seen—on two or three occasions—is often present to my fancy——"

"And pray who is this fair being to whom you allude?" asked the Duke: "for of course she must be fair, thus to have made an impression on your heart."

"She is the loveliest girl I ever beheld in my life!" ejaculated Octavian, with an enthusiasm which he could not at the moment repress, but which when thus given way to, left him overwhelmed with confusion.

"But who is she?" inquired Marchmont. "You may tell me: I never interfere treacherously with my friends' love-affairs."

"I would tell you cheerfully—but I myself do not know," responded Octavian. "I have seen her on two or three occasions, walking with a youth whom by the likeness I know to be her brother——"

"Then you have never spoken to her?" asked the Duke.

"Never," replied Meredith. "She is as modest as she is beautiful; and I do not think that she even so much as noticed that she was on those occasions the object of my interested regards. No—she is virgin bashfulness itself!"

"And to what sphere of life does your unknown fair one belong? Ah, by that tell-tale blush I see she is beneath your aspirations—or rather beneath what they ought to be."

"This brother and sister of whom I am speaking," replied Octavian, in a serious tone, "are evidently respectable——"

"Respectable, but not rich?" exclaimed the Duke. "Perhaps tradesman's children, or something of that sort? Now, my dear friend, renounce this phantasy of your's as speedily as ever you can."

"Yes—I must, I must," said Octavian quickly, and with some degree of emotion. "It is useless to cherish a dream—madness, in my position, to cradle myself in a delusion!"

"The fact is," resumed Marchmont, "that if you fancied an obscure girl ever so fondly and passionately—I mean in a virtuous sense—you could not afford to love her. Your circumstances will not permit you. You must marry, Octavian, according to the counsel which I have given you. It may seem repulsive at first; but the longer you think of it, the more palatable will my plan appear. Get a position, by all means: make yourself truly independent of your father, and of your elder brother after him. There are heiresses who would jump at an offer from a good-looking young man with the title of Lord prefixed to his name. What say you, Meredith?"

"It is something to be thought over," replied the young nobleman: and then he added slowly, "If I did form such an alliance, I would do my duty towards my wife—I would surround her with attentions, even if I could not bring my heart to love her with sincerity——But where are such heiresses to be looked for?"

"Where?" said the Duke, apparently in a careless manner. "Oh, that is your business! I have given you the counsel: it is now for you——But, Ah! when I bethink me, there is the daughter of that very gentleman we spoke of just now."

"Who?" inquired Octavian.

"Armytage," was the Duke's response. "Do you know, my good fellow, that Armytage is a very wealthy man—and that his daughter's dowry will be sixty thousand pounds on her wedding-day? This I can tell you for a fact. I have known Armytage, as you are aware, for a great number of years: I respect him because he is an upright, honest man, who by his own industry has made himself."

"He was your factor, or steward, or intendant originally—or something of that sort—was he not?" inquired Octavian, who had been listening thoughtfully to all that the Duke said.

"Yes—something of that sort," responded Marchmont, again relapsing into his manner of seeming carelessness. "He scraped together some money; and I think he had a pretty considerable sum left him by a deceased relative. So he came up to London—launched out in business as a merchant and speculator—and thus made his fortune. You know very well, Octavian, that my antipathies are great in respect to the plebeian money-plodders on the other side of Temple Bar: but in this individual instance I have never forgotten that Armytage served me faithfully and honestly—and so I have countenanced him."

"The feeling does you honour, my dear Duke," replied Octavian warmly: for he believed in its sincerity. "It is all the more honourable too, inasmuch as it is at the expense of a prejudice."

"And Zoe—Mr. Armytage's daughter—is really a beautiful girl," proceeded the Duke,—"elegant, accomplished, and well calculated to shine in any drawing-room. Come, my dear friend, I see that my counsel is not altogether thrown away upon you. We will have lunch now, and then go out for a ride. You can reflect at your leisure upon all that I have been suggesting."

"Yes," murmured Octavian, with another ill-repressed sigh, as he thought of the beautiful unknown whom he had seen on two or three occasions, and whose bashful loveliness had made more or less impression on his heart.

CHAPTER XI.

ZOE.

In a sumptuously furnished drawing-room, in a house belonging to one of the handsomest terraces in the Regent's Park, a lady was seated. The apartment itself was characterized with splendour more than with elegance: every detail of its appointments was rich and costly—so that the evidences of wealth were assembled together with a profusion more calculated for ostentatious display than consistent with refined taste. The walls were crowded with vast mirrors: the style of the furniture was of scarlet and gold: nick-nacks which had cost vast sums, were scattered about as ornamental trifles. The room, though spacious, was in point of fact encumbered with its own magnificence: and thus was it divested of that real air of comfort which good taste knows so skilfully how to blend with the dazzling effects of splendour.

Yet amidst all these objects of a grand and gorgeous luxury which were so overwhelmingly heaped together in this drawing-room, there were a few slight evidences of a more correct and refined intellect than that which had presided over the general appointments of the apartment. There were flowers tastefully arranged with a view to the harmonizing of their brilliant colours: music rested upon an open piano, and lay upon a stool near a harp. There was a portfolio upon one of the centre-tables; and this contained several beautiful specimens of drawing, alike in pencil and in water-colour. An elegant piece of embroidery-work, half finished, lay on the sofa on which sat the fair occupant of this room. The books which were formally arranged upon the tables for mere purposes of show, were as trumpery in their contents as they were gorgeous in their binding: but on the sofa, near the embroidery, lay three or four volumes containing the works of the best British poets; and these were in a comparatively common binding. The dress of the young lady herself was simple and neat—in the best possible taste—and therefore in reality characterized with a more real elegance than if it had been of the magnificent style which one would have expected to discern on the part of a female occupant of that sumptuously furnished room. Need we say that it was the refined taste of this lady to which a visitor would feel himself indebted for those little evidences of superior and more intellectual judgment which, few though they were, nevertheless afforded a certain relief to the eye and to the mind, otherwise dazzled and satiated by the presence of all that ostentatious display of wealth?

The lady of whom we are speaking, was Zoe, Mr. Armytage's daughter; and the house to which we have introduced the reader, was Mr. Armytage's mansion. All the rooms in that house—save two—were furnished with a costliness corresponding to that of the principal apartment: thousands and thousands of pounds must have been lavished in fitting up this gorgeous dwelling. But everywhere throughout the mansion, with the exception of the two rooms to which we have alluded, there was the pervasive indication of the vulgar mind of a *parvenu*, who, aspiring to move in the best and most brilliant society, fancied that his own plebeian origin and upstart position would be lost sight of in the dazzling splendours by which he was surrounded. The two rooms which formed an exception to the rule, were the private apartments of Zoe Armytage herself: namely, her boudoir and her bed-chamber. Those she had caused to be fitted up in conformance with her own refined taste; and the simple elegance which characterized these rooms, afforded a sufficient proof of what the entire mansion would have been if the same genius had superintended all its appointments.

But now, between three and four o'clock on a certain afternoon, we find Miss Armytage seated in the drawing-room, from the simple fact that this was the visiting hour when "morning calls" might be expected: for in the fashionable world it is always *morning* until dinner-time, even though the dinner hour be postponed until seven o'clock in the evening. Zoe, however, could not endure the magnificence of that apartment unless it were relieved by the presence of flowers, and unless her time, when she was alone, could be occupied with music, with her pencil, her embroidery, or her favourite authors. The simply-bound books, therefore, had accompanied her from the well-chosen little library in her own boudoir; because not for a single instant could she bear to bend over the nauseating trash which filled the gorgeously bound Annuals which lay upon the tables.

Miss Armytage was about twenty years of age. Her countenance was an oval of the most faultless outline: she was not merely beautiful, but interesting—and of that sweet loveable appearance which, apart from mere beauty, renders a young woman so exquisitely charming. Her features were regular and delicately formed: her nose was perfectly straight: her mouth was small—the lips classically cut, and of scarlet brightness. Her eyes were large and of a clear limpid blue,—fringed with dark lashes, and surmounted by brows well separated and finely arched: so that the expression of her countenance was full of frankness and ingenuous innocence. Those lashes and those brows were many shades darker than her hair, which was of a rich light brown—soft and silky—and with so lustrous a gloss upon it, that if worn in bands and left somewhat wavy, it seemed golden where the light fell upon it, and dark where the shades remained. But if worn in ringlets, then did a perfect shower of that light brown hair fall in natural curls on either side of this lovely countenance,—descending upon well-formed shoulders, and upon a neck pure and stainless as alabaster. There was something inexpressibly sweet in her smile: the purity of her thoughts made her countenance seem the face of an angel; and as her complexion was delicately fair, though with the roseate tint of health upon the cheeks, this transparent purity of the skin added to the angelic style of her loveliness.

Though not tall—indeed not above the middle height of woman—her figure nevertheless appeared of a loftier stature on account of its admirable symmetry, its lithe elasticity, and its flowing roundness of contour and of limb. Every movement was characterized by an unstudied grace: every gesture was replete with an elegance all its

own. However plebeian her parentage might have been, there were nevertheless all the best unbought graces of a natural aristocracy about this beautiful and charming creature.

Such was Zoe Armytage. But how was it that such a man as he who was introduced to the reader in the preceding chapter, could possess such a daughter? Mr. Armytage had risen from next to nothing. He did not mind sometimes boasting amongst his City acquaintances—never amongst his fashionable ones—that he had been the architect of his own fortune: yet he never was known definitely to state what he was in the beginning. He went no farther back than the period when he acted as steward or intendant over the vast estates of the present Duke of Marchmont. However, at the time when Zoe was old enough to begin to receive impressions from the circumstances in which she was placed, her father was already a well-to-do man. Thus, whatever his earliest position might have been, Zoe's recollections went no farther back than to associate themselves with a comfortable well-furnished home, with servants, and the usual appendages of rapidly increasing prosperity. Her mother had died early; and as she grew up, she perceived, with an understanding beyond her years, that though her father supervised the governess and the preceptors who managed the various departments of her education, he was by no means capable of judiciously exercising such authority. She loved her father, not merely because she was naturally of an affectionate disposition—but likewise because she beheld, or fancied she beheld, in his zealous care on her behalf, a fond paternal endeavour to indemnify her as much as possible for the loss of her maternal parent. Thus as she grew up, she delicately avoided hurting her father's feelings by suffering him to perceive that her own intuitive good taste and naturally delicate appreciation were as pure gold is to dross in comparison with his vulgar, upstart, *parvenu* notions. While seeming to follow his advice in all her studies, she nevertheless in reality yielded implicit confidence to the sounder judgment and better tastes of the first-rate governess and masters who were engaged in her tuition. The result was that her mind expanded beneath the best possible influences, totally unaffected by that erroneous one which her father sought to shed upon every phase of its development. For if she had listened to him, she would have devoted herself to the fashionable frivolities instead of to the substantialities of education: she would have become fitted only for a mere drawing-room doll—whereas she had turned out an intellectual and truly accomplished young lady.

It may easily be supposed that with a mind so gifted and with an understanding so capacious as Zoe's, she could not have failed to observe the ways in which her father had obtained wealth. She knew him to be one who had speculated—if speculation it could be called—with all that worldly-minded shrewdness which invariably left him a gainer, though the enterprise itself should fail and involve all his confiding associates in ruin. She knew likewise that he lent money to the profligate and the necessitous at a usurious rate, and never without security more or less tangible: she knew that the extravagances of the patrician spendthrift and the embarrassments of the struggling, hard-working, industrious trader, had been the sources of no inconsiderable part of his immense fortune. She was aware that he had seen poverty in palaces as well as in prisons—and had penetrated into both with no sympathising object, but for the mere purpose of availing himself of the proud lord's wants or the poor tradesman's necessities, as the means of aggrandizing his own wealth. All this did Zoe know: and therefore she had a complete reading of her father's heart. She knew that it was not merely hard, because hardness melts—and *his* heart never melted; that it was not merely cold—because coldness may relax, and *his* never relaxed: but she knew its utter nothingness in respect to all kindly sentiments when dealing with the world—its complete impassability in the pursuance of a career which had simply one aim: namely, money-making.

All this Zoe knew; and yet she loved her father. She would not suffer herself to despise him: she could not possibly hate him. She loved him because she fancied—and in this instance only was her judgment at fault—that all he did for her was the result of a doting fondness on his part. Of this fondness she beheld the evidences in the sums he had spent upon her education—the constant care which he made her take of her health—the visible pride with which he surveyed her in his own sumptuous saloons—the separate equipages he kept for her—the lavish profusion with which he furnished her purse—the rich presents he was continuously making her—the exultation with which he would sometimes hint that she ought to form a brilliant alliance—and the assurance he was constantly giving her that his only object in heaping up wealth was to endow her with those riches. Fine as Zoe's intellect was, and shrewd her understanding, it is nevertheless not to be wondered at if, in her inexperience of the world, and the natural generosity of her heart, she should put the most favourable interpretation upon her father's conduct towards her. But Mr. Armytage did really love his daughter, though it was a love after the fashion of his own sordid soul—a love that was made up of vulgar pride as much as of any other element. He saw that she was beautiful, and he was proud of her: he heard her accomplishments spoken of, and he flattered himself that for these she was indebted much more to his own supervising judgment than to the fine qualifications of her own intellect or to the proficiency of her governess and preceptors. To *her* only did he ever speak in accents of fondness: her influence alone could induce him to perform a charitable action—though this he would emblazon with all the flaming hues of his own ostentation. But still Zoe saw how different he was to her than to the rest of the world: she attributed it to a pure paternal fondness; and therefore was it that, with all his faults, she loved her father so tenderly and so well. Little did she think that this father of her's would drag her to the altar and immolate her as the sacrifice to a patrician alliance, rather than suffer her to proceed of her own accord to that altar, to bestow her hand on some plebeian object of her choice, if such choice she should happen to make.

Zoe however had made no such choice. Yet she loved: and who it was that had thus become the object of her affections, will be presently seen. He whom she thus loved, was as yet totally ignorant

that he had made any impression upon the mind of this charming young lady: no one suspected her love—neither her father nor her handmaids. The natural purity of her thoughts, blended with her maidenly dignity, had prevented her from betraying the secret by even the slightest sign whereby the sentiment of love is so often wont to reveal itself. At the time of which we are writing, Zoe's love had not existed many months in her heart; and yet it was already profoundly rooted—it had entertwined itself, so to speak, with every fibre of her being. But it was a love entirely of the sentiment, and not of the sense—a love which was strictly a sentiment, and not a passion—a love of that æsthetic character in which the ancient Greeks believed, but the mere mention of which only provokes the sneer of scepticism in this more worldly-minded and practical age. Nor do we ourselves believe that such love is often found. It is the lost paradise of the soul, of which few are now permitted to obtain a glimpse—much less to receive an infusion of its pure and holy light into the sanctuary of their hearts. Yet such a love as that was Zoe's; and she cherished it without ever dreaming of aught beyond. The very idea of its realization would have seemed to her a thought tinctured with grossness, if emanating from herself and not inspired by an avowal on the part of its object.

Having thus sufficiently introduced Miss Armytage to our readers, we may pursue the thread of our narrative. It was, as we have already said, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, that Zoe, having quitted her boudoir, took her seat in the drawing-room to await the presence of any visitor or visitress who might happen to call. Her father had been with her for about half-an-hour: she had played to him on the piano and the harp; and he had looked over her portfolio of drawings. Not that he had the faintest idea of music, nor the slightest taste in a pictorial or artistic sense: but he chose to affect a very great fondness for those elegant accomplishments in which his daughter excelled—while he cordially detested the course of reading to which she was particularly devoted. He had only left her at the time of which we are writing, to speak to some one on business who had called at the mansion in the Regent's Park: for though he had ostensibly retired from commercial affairs by giving up his counting-house in the City, he nevertheless continued in a sort of private manner his financial enterprises by advancing loans on good security.

Having transacted whatsoever business it was that had called him away, Mr. Armytage returned to the drawing room, where Zoe in the interval had taken up one of the books which she had brought from the boudoir.

"What are you reading there, my love?" he inquired, leaning over the back of the sofa, which was drawn away from the wall so as to be near one of the centre-tables.

"Cowper's Poems," responded Zoe, looking up at her father with a sweet glance, in which there was an amiable deprecation: for she evidently foresaw the observation that would next come from his lips.

"How absurd," he exclaimed, "to waste your time over that sentimental nonsense. And really, Zoe, when there are so many elegantly bound books which you might group about you, I wonder at your having those poor-looking volumes here in the drawing-room."

"I will put them out of sight, dear father," she at once rejoined, "if you object to them:"—and she hastened to thrust the books under one of the immense velvet cushions bordered with gold fringes and having long tassels likewise of gold.

"If you don't like the tales and poetry in those volumes," continued Mr. Armytage, glancing towards the trumpery works in their splendid binding that lay upon the table, "it is quite fashionable, you know, to have the last new novel lying by your side. I have often begged you, my dear Zoe, to read fashionable novels: they improve the taste, and furnish ideas for conversation in company."

"Really, my dear father," replied Zoe, who however seldom contradicted or remonstrated against the displays of her sire's false notions and vulgar taste in such matters, "I do not think that these fashionable novels of which you speak, can in any way afford improvement for the mind or manners; and as for the conversation, heaven help those who think of drawing their inspirations from such sources!"

Mr. Armytage was about to reply, when an equipage dashed up to the front of the house: and hastening to the window, he exclaimed, "It is my friend the Duke of Marchmont."

He then sat down and took up a book; so that he might have the air of one who did not put himself out of the way for even a ducal visitor, but would receive him with as little excitement and as little fluttering of pride as if he were the humblest of acquaintances. But he was not destined to receive the visit at all on the present occasion: for when one of his footmen,—habited, by the bye, in a livery resplendently gorgeous,—made his appearance in the drawing-room, it was not to announce the Duke, but simply to request Mr. Armytage to step down, as his Grace had a word to say to him but begged to be excused alighting from his carriage as he was in a hurry to keep an appointment elsewhere. For a moment a scowl of displeasure appeared upon the features of Mr. Armytage, as if he felt that he was receiving the treatment of a plebeian at the hands of a patrician immeasurably his superior: but the next moment, as a recollection flashed to his mind, his countenance recovered its wonted cold equanimity—and he sped down stairs.

"No doubt," he thought to himself, as he thus hastened forth to the Duke's carriage, "Marchmont has come to tell me something about the affair I spoke to him of a few days back."

The Duke was alone inside the carriage; and as Armytage hurried up to the window, the footman who had descended from behind to knock at the front door, stood back a pace or two so as not to have the air of listening to whatsoever might be said.

"I just called to tell you, Armytage," said the Duke, in a low voice, "that I have been enabled to manage that little business about which you called on me the other day. What say you to Lord Octavian Meredith, youngest son of the Marquis of Penshurst?"

Mr. Armytage reflected deeply for a few minutes, without making any response.

"The family is a very ancient and a most honourable one," continued the Duke of Marchmont. "Meredith himself is a handsome and elegant young man——"

"But if I mistake not," observed Mr. Armytage, "he is at variance with his relatives; and I would not have my daughter marry into any family where she would stand a chance of being cut, and where I myself should not be a welcome guest."

"Of all this you need entertain no apprehension," rejoined the Duke of Marchmont. "The Marquis of Penshurst is more parsimonious than proud; and depend upon it, he will joyfully receive his son and his son's wife when the latter brings an ample dowry with her on her wedding-day. As for yourself, you have only to lend a few thousand pounds to Lord Meredith, the Marquis's eldest son—and to Lord Charles, his second son—both of whom are kept by their father's penuriousness in total want of money,—you have only to do this, I say, in order to receive all possible civility at their hands."

"Yes, your Grace speaks truly," said Mr. Armytage. "As for Octavian Meredith, he is a very nice young man—a son-in-law of whom one might feel proud. But are you sure, my lord——"

"I am sure, Armytage," interrupted the Duke, "that I have managed the thing most capitally for you. Meredith furnished me an opportunity the other day of counselling him relative to his affairs: indeed it was the very same day on which you yourself called—and I have had him with me every day since. You may expect a visit from him this afternoon: so I shall not wait another moment—lest he might think it strange if he were to see me in conversation with you. Play your cards well, Armytage—and the fair Zoe will be Lady Octavian Meredith."

The carriage drove away; and Mr. Armytage re-ascended to his drawing-room, perfectly satisfied with the proposed arrangements: for after all the Duke of Marchmont had just said, he saw at a glance how his daughter and himself would obtain, after the marriage, a suitable footing in the Penshurst family. But as he returned to the apartment in which Zoe was seated, his countenance betrayed not that anything unusual was passing in his mind; and as he was invariably accustomed to parade before his daughter, as well as in the presence of his friends and acquaintances, his great intimacy with the Duke of Marchmont, he was at no loss for an excuse for his Grace's flying visit.

"If I was to listen to that fellow Marchmont," he said to Zoe, "you would scarcely ever have my society at the dinner-table. He is always wanting me to go and dine with him. That is what he came for just now. I do really believe he feels more pleasure in my company than in that of any other of his friends. But hark! there's another knock at the door."

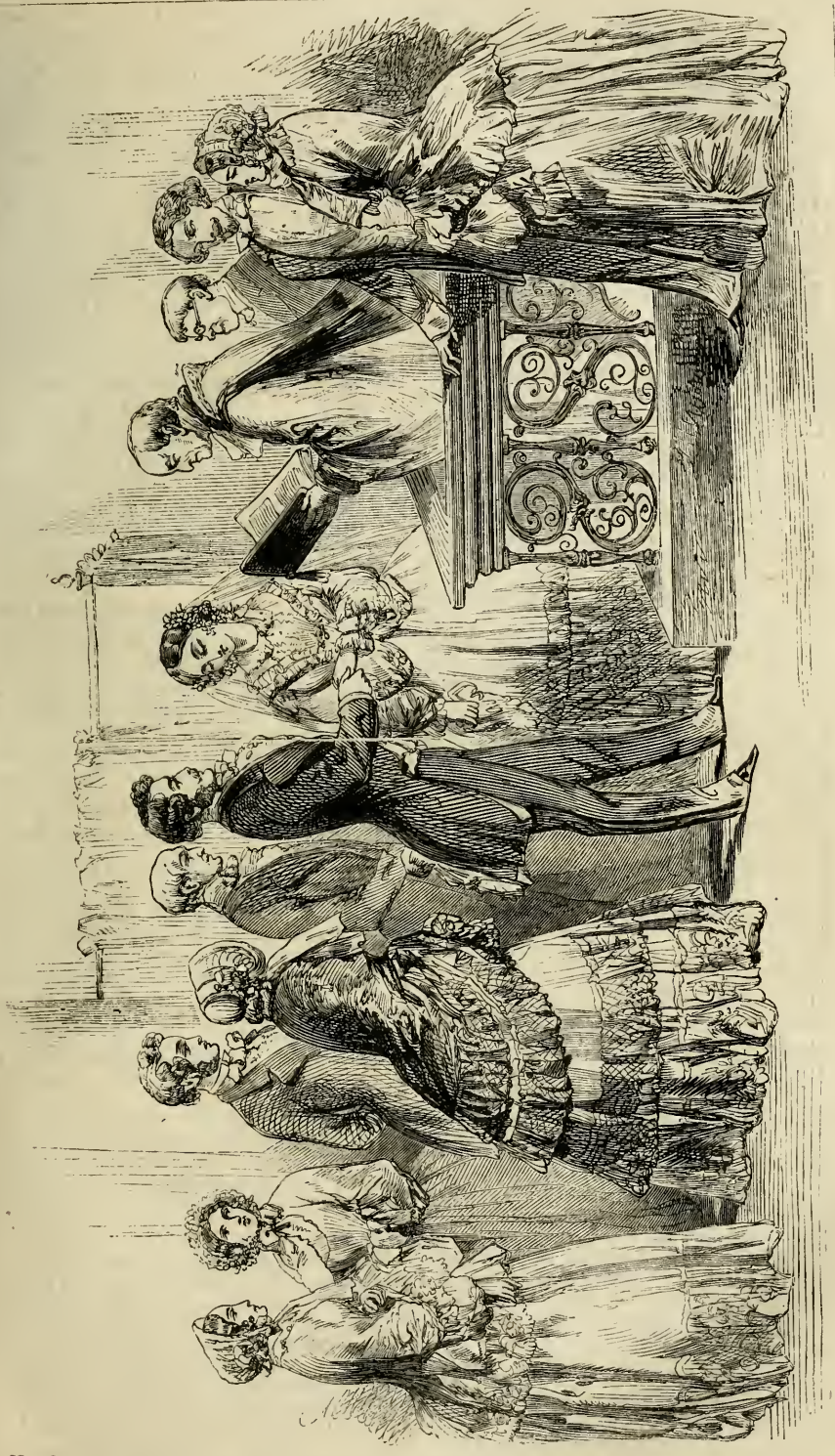
Again did Mr. Armytage take up one of the splendidly bound annuals, and affect to be reading some stanzas by Lady Letitia Fitzharding Fitzpatrick Languishdale. The lines were by courtesy denominated poetry; but in reality they were the most mawkish twaddle that ever was contained in an array of words set out in unmetrical lines, and with false jingles by way of rhymes. The door was thrown open by the gorgeously dressed footman; and Lord Octavian Meredith was announced.

The reader is already aware that this young nobleman had for some little time past been an occasional visitor at Mr. Armytage's house, and one of those scions of the aristocracy whom the wealthy *parvenu* had, through the aid of the Duke of Marchmont, secured as the "lions" of his saloons. He therefore received Octavian with becoming courtesy—though with no more cordiality than he had been previously wont to display; for he was careful not to excite a suspicion of the machinations which were in progress. Zoe received the young nobleman with a lady-like affability; and the conversation at first turned upon indifferent subjects. Suddenly Mr. Armytage recollected that he had letters to send off to the post; and he begged his lordship to excuse his temporary absence from the room.

Meredith was now alone with Zoe; and he gave the conversation an intellectual turn. The young lady entered easily into this train of discourse: it was pursued—and both became gradually more and more interested in it. Meredith saw that Zoe possessed a well-cultivated mind: he had all along known that she was accomplished; but he did not suspect the existence of so much of wisdom's treasures in her understanding. He was the more charmed too, inasmuch as her remarks were made with a mingling of well-bred ease and maidenly bashfulness which totally divested her of the obtrusiveness of the "blue-stocking." He had come expressly thus to draw her out—or, in other words, to fathom the depths of her mind: for he was neither so selfishly degraded in his own disposition, nor so desperate in his circumstances, as to resolve all in a moment to seek as a wife a young female of shallow intellect and frivolous disposition. He remained an hour with Zoe on this occasion; so that he far exceeded the usual limit of a morning call: but the interval appeared to him the lapse of a few minutes only. He had never known so much of Zoe before; and he was as much surprised and delighted at what he thus found her to be on a better acquaintance.

He took his leave, and striking into one of the most secluded portions of the Regent's Park, deliberated with himself. Did he love Zoe? No: assuredly not. Could he bring himself to love her? He sighed. That sigh was an answer to the question—an answer in the negative! The image of the lovely unknown of whom he had spoken to the Duke of Marchmont, suddenly rose up to his mental vision; and he felt that his heart was inextricably engaged there. Then, should he persevere in his contemplated suit with Zoe? His naturally honourable feelings shrank from the thought. At that instant he almost loathed himself as one who had entertained the idea of performing the despicable part of a selfish fortune-hunter; and he said to himself, "No: poverty sooner — poverty ten thousand times sooner, in preference to this utter self-abasement in my own estimation!"

Two days afterwards there was a splendid party at the house of Mr. Armytage; and Lord Octavian Meredith was one of the invited guests. He attached himself to Zoe as her principal partner in the dance: he turned the music for her as she



sat at the piano: he accompanied her in a duet. He had a fine voice and sang admirably: Zoe's voice was of silvery softness; and she too sang with exquisite taste—a taste that was all the more apparent from the utter absence of affectation. When Lord Octavian, after having sat by Zoe's side at the supper-table, returned at two in the morning to his own lodgings, he thought to himself that never did Miss Armytage appear so ravishingly beautiful and so charmingly fascinating in his eyes; so that he mentally ejaculated, "After all, I think I can love her!"

On the following day he paid the usual visit of courtesy which follows an evening's entertainment; and on this occasion he remained an hour and a half with Zoe,—her father having at the time, or pretending to have, a very pressing appointment with some great nobleman, whom he of course spoke of as his very particular and intimate friend. After this visit Lord Octavian said confidently to himself, "I not only *can* love her—but I *do* already love her!"

Yet an image rose up before him, and a sigh came up into his very throat. He hurried his pace through the Regent's Park as if to escape from the image: he stifled the sigh ere giving it vent; and then he endeavoured to persuade himself that it was all nothing—that the fair unknown had really no hold upon his affections—that it was a mere passing whim or caprice excited by a pretty face and a sylphid figure—and besides, that it was perfectly ridiculous to entertain a serious thought of one to whom he had never spoken in his life, and whom he might never see again. Still there was a secret voice speaking with its silent eloquence in the depth of his soul, which told him that he was reasoning not as the truth really was, but according as he wished it to be; and this time the deep-drawn sigh could not be altogether stifled.

However, the next day beheld him again a visitor at Mr. Armytage's house. How could he help going thither on this occasion?—he had a piece of new music of which he had spoken on the preceding day, and which he had volunteered to bring Zoe. It was a duet; and as Mr. Armytage was present in the drawing-room when Octavian was ushered thither, there was no impropriety in his offering to sing it with the young lady. They did sing it: Octavian thought that never had Miss Armytage displayed her musical accomplishments with so fine an effect—never had her loveliness appeared more angelically charming. When he took his leave after this visit, he had far less difficulty in putting aside the image of the beauteous unknown, or in suppressing the rising sigh, than he had experienced on the preceding day. On the following day he called upon Zoe again; and for nearly each successive day for the ensuing six weeks. On every occasion he became—or fancied that he became, more profoundly enamoured of Miss Armytage: he saw himself received with a gradually increasing cordiality on the part of the father, and with an unchanging affability on that of the daughter. He seldom thought now of the beauteous unknown: less seldom too did he find himself sighing when her image did happen to rise up to his mental vision. But did Zoe herself love him? was he indeed not indifferent to her? or did she regard him merely as a visitor with whom a sort of intellectual friendship had sprung up? This question puzzled him: he had never seen on Zoe's part the slightest betrayal of any tender partiality towards him. What if he were to offer and to be refused? Such a catastrophe would be terribly humiliating to his manly pride;—and in this frame of mind, hovering between hope and uncertainty, it was by no means difficult for Octavian Meredith to persuade himself that he loved Miss Armytage to a degree that his very happiness depended upon their alliance. To do him ample justice, the more he had seen of her and the more he had felt himself attracted towards her, the less he had thought of the pecuniary advantages to be derived from such a marriage. The naturally noble feelings of his disposition, by inducing him to scorn the thought of mere selfish interest, led him to believe that his sentiment towards Zoe was now altogether a disinterested and a legitimate one. So easy is it, under certain circumstances, to hug as a positively settled belief that which we really wish to believe in!—so facile is it to cheat at times our own higher intelligence and regard our hopes and our wishes as actual and unmistakable convictions! There are more false fanaticisms and delusions of the mind than even the most experienced of men are always willing to admit unto themselves.

Six weeks, as we have said, had passed since that day on which we first introduced Zoe to our readers: and one afternoon Octavian Meredith called at a somewhat earlier hour than usual. He found Zoe alone in the drawing-room; and as he entered, she put down a book which she had been reading.

"May I see," he inquired, after the usual compliments had passed, "what is the subject of your recreative study?"

"Oh, certainly," responded the young lady, with her usual affable smile. "It is one of my favourite authors."

"Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village,'" said Octavian, as he took up the book. "Miss Armytage, there must be times when, with your intelligence, you view with a feeling which borders on disgust the frivolities of fashionable life. I confess candidly that I do. I am convinced that where there is no intellect there is no heart—but that if the head be hollow, the place where the heart should be is likewise a void."

"I know not, my lord," replied Zoe, "that I would go altogether to such an extreme conclusion——"

"No—because were you to admit it," he exclaimed, with irrepressible enthusiasm, "you would be as it were proclaiming that you are all heart, because you are all intelligence. Ah! Miss Armytage," he added, "were I possessed of a fortune, I should sink down upon my knees to lay it at your feet!"

Zoe averted her countenance, where the colour went and came in rapid transitions. It was evident that she knew not how to reply; and Meredith was not altogether sure whether she were offended or pleased by this sort of avowal he had just made. But that she experienced one or the other of those feelings, he had no doubt: for indifferent and unruffled she assuredly was not.

"If I have offended you, Miss Armytage," he

went on to say, speaking tremulously, "I should be bitterly irritated against myself. Tell me—have I offended you?"

"No, my lord," she answered, but in accents that were scarcely audible—while the transient glance which she threw upon the young nobleman, conveyed the first revelation he had ever yet obtained in respect to the real feeling with which the young lady regarded him.

"Then if I have not offended you," he said, "I may hope that I am not altogether indifferent to you? I have no fortune, Miss Armytage, to lay at your feet: but I have a loving and affectionate heart to offer you. Will you accept it?"—and he sank upon his knees before her.

Zoe, with her countenance still averted, and with the colour still coming and going rapidly upon her beauteous cheeks, made no verbal answer—but proffered him her hand. He took it, and conveyed it to his lips. But scarcely had those lips touched it, when she gently but firmly disengaged it; and rising from her seat, said in a low but clear voice, "My lord, I must now refer you to my father——Perhaps I ought to have done so in the first instance," she added more gently still.

Octavian had started up from his knees, smitten with the apprehension that he had been too bold in kissing the beautiful white hand which was proffered him, and that the young lady was offended: but he saw by her looks that it was not so. Her conduct was merely that of maiden dignity and of filial obedience; so that all in a moment she rose a thousand times higher in his estimation, if possible, than she had previously stood—highly as he had esteemed her before.

"But I may tell Mr. Armytage," he said, gazing tenderly upon her, "that your consent is already obtained, if his be vouchsafed?"

"It would be on my part, my lord, a ridiculous affectation," responded Zoe, in a voice that was tremulously clear; but yet she spoke with downcast eyes and with a modest confusion bashfully blending with her firmness,—"an affectation insulting, too, to the minds of both of us, were I to declare that you are an object of indifference to me. You have my consent, if you obtain my father's. And think not, my lord, that I fail to appreciate the honour which you confer upon me—the perhaps too flattering compliment which you pay me——"

"Zoe—dearest Zoe!" exclaimed Octavian, "never did you seem more charming in my eyes! never was your conduct more admirable than at this moment! If your father will consent to our union, I swear that your happiness shall henceforth prove the study of my life!"

Again he took her hand—again he pressed it to his lips—and it was not withdrawn—but then he retained it only for a single instant; and bending upon the lovely blushing girl a look of tenderness, he issued from the room. The moment the door closed behind him, Zoe sank upon the sofa whence she had risen up,—murmuring to herself with a sensation of holy rapture, "He loves me! he loves me!"

Yes—Octavian Meredith had all along been the object of Zoe's secret and hidden affection; and thus the designs of her father were, by an extraordinary coincidence, forwarded by her own feelings. We denominate it *extraordinary*, because let the reader reflect how seldom it is in real life that where a parent has from selfish or sordid motives fixed upon a particular individual to become his son-in-law, the daughter's own heart has the whole time been acquiescing in the choice. It was however so on the present occasion; and though Miss Armytage was not of a disposition to abandon herself to a feverish and unnatural excitement—though her mind was too strong and her temperament too placid for such inordinate agitation—yet it would be wrong to imagine, and would indeed be stamping her as deficient in the softness of feminine feeling, if we were to say that her heart fluttered not at all. It did palpitate with a considerable degree of suspense; but her emotions betrayed themselves not outwardly with much violence: yet it was not through any habitual dissimulation nor studied hypocrisy that they were concealed. No—she was all guileless innocence and unsophisticated ingenuousness: but her disposition, as already stated, was naturally calm—her feelings sank deep down and bubbled up but little to the surface—and they were the purer, the more genuine, and the more lasting on that very account.

She was not kept long in a state of uncertainty. In about half-an-hour the door opened, and Octavian hastened into her presence again, his countenance beaming with rapture and delight, not unmingled with astonishment. The result of his interview with Mr. Armytage was thus at once proclaimed, even before a single syllable fell from his lips; and now Zoe no longer withdrew her hand when he sought to retain it—nor did she with a prudish affectation hold back her countenance from the kiss which her accepted lover imprinted on her pure chaste forehead.

Octavian might well be astonished at the assent which he had received from Mr. Armytage: for notwithstanding the reasoning of the Duke of Marchmont, he had scarcely anticipated that a man whom he knew to be so worldly-minded as Zoe's father, would with a comparative readiness afford his acquiescence to the suit of a portionless lover. But then Mr. Armytage had given an affirmative response in that specious manner which he was so proficient in adopting. He had thrown out a hint to the effect that he had never sought for his daughter an alliance with mere rank, but had hoped that she would become the wife of some individual more in her own sphere.

"However," he had gone on to observe, "Zoe is an only child; and I am too fondly devoted to her to thwart her happiness in a single respect. You say, my lord, that she loves you; and therefore you have my concurrence. All my earthly aims are concentrated in the ensurance of my beloved Zoe's felicity. Without being considered guilty of too much paternal pride, I may safely assert that I bestow upon you a veritable treasure. See that you treat her kindly, my lord: show me that you appreciate the precious gift which I now declare to be your's: and I shall know how to express my gratitude."

Lord Octavian made suitable acknowledgments; and he was completely deceived by the specious language used by Mr. Armytage on this occasion—so that he thought to himself that Zoe's father must in reality possess an excellent heart notwith-

standing his worldly-minded pursuits. Before he and Mr. Armytage separated on that occasion, the latter gave the young nobleman to understand the amount of the dowry he purposed to give his daughter—the mode of its settlement—and the allowance that would be made to Octavian himself. To all these proposals Meredith assented with a readiness which originated from his own earnest straining to convince himself as well as others, that he was unbiassed by interested views in the matter. Then Mr. Armytage hinted that if the young nobleman had any debts they should at once be liquidated: but to this offer Octavian was enabled to give a proud negative, he having no pecuniary liabilities. We do not mean that the pride of that response was of an aristocratic nature: it was the pride of one who felt that he might assume a manly dignity in proclaiming the rectitude of his conduct, which had been proof against all the temptations to extravagance by which he had of late been surrounded.

But if Octavian went away from that interview in astonishment at the apparently frank, noble-minded, and fondly paternal behaviour of Mr. Armytage,—not the less astonished was Mr. Armytage himself to learn that Zoe loved her noble suitor. However, he did not waste much time in pondering upon this matter: it was sufficient for him that Zoe had thus by her own conduct fallen into the views which he had entertained on her behalf; and he sped away to Belgrave Square, to inform the Duke of Marchmont of all that had just taken place.

A month afterwards,—namely, at the end of August, 1847—the bridal took place. Mr. Armytage insisted that it should be solemnized with all possible circumstances of splendour; and immense therefore were the preparations made for the occasion. Zoe would gladly have gone to the altar under circumstances far less ostentatious: but she had never been in the habit of disputing her sire's will—and she was by no means likely to do so while entertaining the belief that he had put all selfish considerations aside through a fond regard for her happiness wholly and solely. She accordingly suffered the arrangements to progress without the slightest remonstrance on her part,—reserving to herself the privilege of settling the precise details of her toilet, which she was resolved should be characterized by that elegant simplicity which was most congenial to her taste and disposition. The wedding-breakfast was to be a perfect banquet; and as if Mr. Armytage did not already possess plate sufficient, he expended two or three thousand pounds in the purchase of additional table-ornaments to be used on the occasion. The invitations were likewise more numerous than Zoe would have preferred, if left to her own choice: but herein again she quietly let her father have his own way. The Duke of Marchmont faithfully promised to attend at the wedding-breakfast; and Mr. Armytage, satisfied with this pledge, readily excused his Grace from accompanying the bridal party to the church.

On the eve of the day fixed for the ceremony, Mr. Armytage was seized with a violent fit of the gout; and his physicians positively forbade him from attempting to stir out of doors. Zoe, deeply afflicted at this circumstance, besought her sire to postpone the wedding: but he would not listen to it. All the preparations were fully made; and he was determined that the ceremony should take place. Zoe still renewed her entreaties: but in the midst of this discussion Octavian Meredith himself arrived,—his countenance beaming with the satisfaction of one who had good intelligence to impart. He was however for a moment saddened on perceiving Mr. Armytage sitting in an easy-chair with one of his legs hugely bandaged up,—saddened too likewise, because he beheld the tears trickling down Zoe's cheeks. The intelligence he had to communicate was to the effect that the invitations, which as a matter of courtesy had been forwarded to his father and his two brothers, were all accepted; and he himself had brought the written replies, addressed to Mr. Armytage. They were couched in courteous terms; and Octavian explained that he was now completely reconciled to his relatives. If any circumstance had been wanting to support the resolution of Mr. Armytage that the bridal should take place on the morrow, notwithstanding his own indisposition,—it was the intelligence Octavian had just imparted. Zoe, perceiving farther remonstrance to be vain, yielded to her sire's will; and her grief at his illness was mitigated not only by the assurance that he should be enabled to preside at the wedding-breakfast, but also by the satisfaction which he and she alike experienced at Octavian's reconciliation with his family.

On the following morning the bridal was celebrated. The Marquis of Penshurst—a tall, thin, pale old man—accompanied by his two elder sons, arrived at the mansion at an early hour; and though they were but little more than coldly courteous to Mr. Armytage, they were on the other hand exceedingly affable and cordial towards Zoe, whose beauty and inobtrusive manners made an immediate impression upon them. The Marquis of Penshurst gave Mr. Armytage to understand that he had converted the allowance of five hundred a-year made to Octavian, into a permanent settlement; and that he had moreover presented the young bridegroom with a thousand guineas, duly paid over to his account at the bankers'.

Two young ladies of rank acted as bridemaids; and an Earl undertook to give the bride away, as her father was unable to proceed to the church. The ceremony was solemnized at All Souls, in the fashionable quarter of Langham Place; and we must content ourselves with observing that the bride looked ravishingly beautiful as well as sweetly interesting. The wedding-breakfast fulfilled, in its sumptuous display of plate and in its profusion of all the choicest delicacies, the intents and wishes of the ostentatious Mr. Armytage: the Duke of Marchmont, faithful to his promise, was amongst the guests, who were described in the newspaper-paragraphs of the following morning as being "the *elite* of the fashionable world." When the repast was over, Zoe—having taken an affectionate and tearful leave of her parent—was handed by the bridegroom to the handsome carriage presented to the young couple by the bride's father; and they set off to spend the honeymoon at some watering-place, where a suitable house had been already engaged for their reception.

CHAPTER XII.

CHRISTINA.

Six weeks had elapsed since the bridal ceremony: it was now the middle of October—and the young couple, having returned to London, took possession of a house in Regent's Park, on the side exactly facing the abode of Mr. Armytage. Zoe naturally wished to be near her father, whom she might thus see daily—or at least very often; and Lord Octavian Meredith, having no particular choice as to the place of his residence, cheerfully carried out the wishes of his beauteous bride. During the honeymoon he had found no reason to be disappointed in the estimate which he had previously formed of Zoe's intellect, temper, and disposition. All the excellent traits of her mind—and she had no bad ones—developed themselves in a manner full well calculated to rivet her husband's affections, if they were susceptible of such adhesion unto her. She was all gentleness and amiability, candour and truthfulness, ingenuousness and innocence. Her love, being crowned by happiness, appeared to render her beauty more angelically fascinating—if indeed there had been any room for such enhancement of her charms. In short, Lord Octavian Meredith had every reason to be the happiest and most contented of men.

One afternoon, a few days after the return of the young couple from the watering-place, Lord Octavian had occasion to call upon Mr. Armytage on some little business connected with the settlement of Zoe's dowry. We should observe that during the interval since the marriage, Mr. Armytage had entirely recovered from his attack of gout, and had become as bustling and active as ever. The business between himself and his son-in-law was speedily concluded; and Octavian took his leave, to retrace his way on foot across the Park to his own dwelling. He was walking along that road which, diverging from the main one near the Colosseum, leads to the inner circle, when his attention was suddenly drawn to a scene that was taking place a little way ahead. A gentleman, having caught the hand of a young female genteelly but simply dressed, was endeavouring to retain it against her will—and was doubtless addressing her in a style of language which excited her virtuous indignation; for as she struggled to release her hand from his grasp, her ejaculations of angered remonstrance reached Octavian's ear. But, Ah! that figure—he recognised it in a moment!—and darting forward, reached the spot swift as an arrow shot from a bow. The gentleman—a gentleman in name only, but not in conduct—was at once stricken to the ground by the chivalrous and indignant Meredith: for it is only fair to observe that if the young person who was the object of the genteel ruffian's outrage, had been an utter stranger to him, he would have acted in precisely the same manner.

The discomfited individual started up from the ground in a furious rage,—exclaiming, "By heaven, sir! whoever you are, you shall give me satisfaction for this insult!"

"It is you who have perpetrated the insult against a well-behaved young lady," was Octavian's coldly dignified response, "and you have received your punishment. If in addition to this chastisement, you require any other, depend upon it you shall receive it at my hands. Here is my card."

"Very good," responded the other, without even glancing at the card which Octavian handed him. "You shall hear from me!"—and with these words, he walked hastily away, brushing off the dust from the sleeve of his coat.

Let us pause for a few minutes to describe the young female whom Meredith had thus delivered from the stranger's audacious conduct, and in whom he recognised the beauteous unknown who has been before alluded to. Beautiful she indeed was, as the reader has been prepared to learn: youthful too—for she did not appear to be more than sixteen or seventeen years of age. Though slender in figure, the symmetry of her proportions constituted a rare model of developing charms. Her countenance was pale—but it was the paleness of beauty and of health: not the dull dead whiteness of the skin, but the purest complexion with a vital animation upon it. Her eyes were large and dark: their naturally lustrous beaming was somewhat subdued by an innate modest bashfulness, and partially veiled by the long ebon lashes that fringed them. Her hair was of the very darkest shade—not that of dull lustreless jet; but that of the shining glossiness of the raven's plumage. It was not merely luxuriant, but of silken softness: and it fell not in ringlets, but in more massive tresses on either side of her beautiful countenance. The rosy hue of the lips set off teeth of a dazzling polish and faultlessly even. When beheld in her quiet moments—for she was now naturally excited by the scene which we have just described—there was a stamp of so much guileless truthfulness and virginal innocence about her, that it was a wonder even the most daring libertine could for a single instant have been so thoroughly mistaken in her character and disposition as to suppose that she would listen to his overtures. Still speaking of her in her tranquil moments, we may add that there was a slight settled shade of melancholy—or perhaps rather of pensiveness, on her beautiful countenance: yet this, in no way detracting from the charms which invested her, only perhaps undefinably enhanced them. We have already said that she was plainly but neatly dressed; and there was a natural grace in every movement and in every gesture of this sweet girl. Her eyes, though bright, had none of passion's fire in them: on the contrary, there was something of dove-like mildness in her looks, if such an expression can be applied to the darkest eyes as well as to those of blue. The outline of her countenance was purely Grecian: and the upper lip had that short rich curl which with some women is the type of high birth—with others an evidence of that instinctive feminine dignity which disdains falsehood and is incapable of guile.

Such was the interesting creature with whom Lord Octavian Meredith now suddenly found himself alone. At the instant that he had rushed up to the spot, her countenance was crimsoned with indignation and a sense of outraged virtue: the next moment, when the audacious libertine was stricken down to the earth, the colour fled from her cheeks, leaving them marble pale. She staggered against the railings which skirted the pathway of the road, and endeavoured to compose herself, so as to make

suitable acknowledgments to her deliverer: but when she heard the libertine who had insulted her, using threatening terms, talking of satisfaction, and declaring that her defender should hear from him, the proceeding assumed a significancy which, inexperienced as the young girl was in the ways of the world, nevertheless sent the thought flashing into her mind that a duel would possibly be the result of the occurrence. A mortal terror accordingly seized upon her: for to this innocent and pure-minded being it seemed shocking to a degree that two human lives should be thus risked on her account, and one of them the life of her gallant deliverer.

Lord Octavian Meredith turned towards the beautiful stranger, and expressed his hope that she was now recovering from the terror into which the incident had plunged her.

"A thousand thanks to you, sir," she answered, in a tremulously murmuring voice, "for your generous behaviour. But did I rightly interpret the words which that rude person uttered? Oh, sir!" she continued, an expression of more than grief—for it amounted to a positive anguish, appearing upon her countenance as she raised her fine dark eyes towards Octavian Meredith,—"I beseech—I implore that no life may be risked——"

"Tranquillize your fears," interrupted the young nobleman, in the gentlest and most soothing tones of his naturally harmonious voice. "The man who could thus insult such a one as you, must be in his heart a coward; and even should he, through fear of the world's scorn, dare me to a duel, rest assured that I will chastise him."

"Good heavens!" murmured the young girl, all her worst fears being thus frightfully confirmed: "you will risk your life!"

"Is it indeed a matter of interest to you that I should take heed of my own safety!"—and in putting this question, Octavian Meredith was irresistibly carried away by those feelings which he had originally experienced towards the lovely unknown, and which were now resuscitated more vividly than ever.

"Can you ask me, sir," she said, still speaking murmuringly, and tremulously, and with affliction in her looks,—"can you ask me if it be a subject of consequence whether lives are to be hazarded? —— Oh! the bare thought is shocking!"—and under the influence of overpowering feelings, she laid her hand upon Meredith's arm, gazing up entreatingly into his countenance as she exclaimed, "For heaven's sake, accept not the defiance of that man whose conduct has placed him utterly beneath your notice!"

The touch of that beautiful girl's hand—light though it were, and gloved though the hand itself was—sent a thrill of unknown pleasure through the entire form of Octavian Meredith. He experienced feelings such as he had never experienced in respect to Zoe; so that with the rapidity of lightning did the conviction flash to his mind that he had deceived himself as to his real sentiments in respect to her who had become his wife, and that he loved her not as he now felt he loved the dark-eyed, raven-haired being who was before him. This conviction caused him to experience a strong sensation of anguish, which instantaneously followed upon the thrill of pleasure the light touch of her hand had sent with electrifying effect through his entire being. He comprehended all in a moment that his happiness was wrecked by the circumstance of having wedded another; and in a paroxysm of irrepressible emotion, he raised his hand to his brow.

"Ah! you yourself, sir, are smitten with horror at the thought of being placed in a position to take the life of a fellow-creature!"—and the young girl, thus very naturally mistaking the cause of his excitement, clasped her hands entreatingly as she went on to exclaim, "Tell me that you will not accept that bad man's defiance! Pardon this importunity on my part—but believe me, it would make me very, very wretched indeed!"

The nature of this colloquy—the close contact into which it brought Meredith and the lovely stranger—the variations of feeling and emotion which the circumstances developed on her part,—all contributed to display her beauty in different lights, and to afford him a reading into the innocence, the generosity, and the kindness of her soul. If he had felt himself attracted towards her on those few occasions when he had casually passed her in the street, when he had neither spoken to her nor heard the sound of her voice, and had only obtained transient glimpses of her charms,—how much more deeply was he interested in her now that she was there close to him—that he could look into the depths of her fine dark eyes —that he beheld the pearly whiteness of her teeth —that he had leisure to examine every feature of her beauteous face—and that a glance rapidly wandering over her figure, confirmed his previous impression of its exquisite symmetry, promising admirable developments—and when, too, her pure breath fanned his very cheek, as under the influence of her feelings she besought him to abstain from the threatened duel! Zoe was forgotten—or if not absolutely forgotten, remembered only as one to whom he had indissolubly linked himself, and who thus stood as a barrier in the way of the crowning happiness of the real love which he experienced. Then too flashed to the mind of the young man the sickening conviction that despite all his sophistical reasonings at the time, he had literally and actually sold himself for Armytage's wealth: whereas, on the other hand, he felt that he could have been content to inhabit the humblest residence, if it were shared by this beauteous being who was now before him.

Such were the feelings and thoughts conjured up all in a moment in the mind of Lord Octavian Meredith, as the charming stranger continued her appeals. For an instant he had flattered himself that these appeals arose from a tender interest which she herself experienced in him: but he had quickly seen, by her answer to that question which he had put, that her entreaties arose merely from a sense of duty and gratitude towards a fellow-creature who had behaved nobly on her behalf.

"Will you not promise me," she said, "that this menaced duel shall not take place?"

"Yes, yes—I promise you," he responded quickly, in order to tranquillize her fears—though without having the intention of keeping the pledge if the threatened satisfaction should be demanded.

"Ah, sir!" persisted the young girl, who, artless and unsophisticated though she were, was never-

theless not to be deceived by an assurance which was belied by her deliverer's look and manner: "you only tell me this to set my mind at ease. Oh, I understand!" she exclaimed, a light suddenly breaking in upon her soul: "you will be forced to obey those false and unnatural laws which society denominates the code of honour! But it shall not be so," she added, abruptly regaining a degree of firmness, and her countenance expressing a promptly-taken resolution. "You have acted generously towards me: I will perform my duty towards you."

"What do you mean?" cried Meredith, in astonishment.

"Will you let me know, sir," inquired the young girl, timidly and bashfully, "the name of him to whom I am under such deep obligations?"

Octavian now understood her in a moment. She purposed to give the proper authorities notice that a duel was to take place; and she hoped that by adopting this course, she would prevent it without suffering his own honour to be compromised. But in the first place, Octavian was no coward—and indeed thought lightly of the prospect of the impending duel; and in the second place he saw that if the authorities were to interfere to prevent it, the worst construction would be put on such a result by his antagonist, who would doubtless proclaim to the world that Meredith himself had deliberately prompted the young girl to give private intimation to the magistrate. So rapidly did all these thoughts flash through his mind, that there was no apparent interval of hesitation or reflection on his part, ere he replied to the query she had put, by saying in a collected off-hand manner, "My name is Richard Percival!"

"Then, Mr. Percival," immediately added the young girl, "accept my gratitude for your generous conduct towards me."

With a graceful inclination of the head, she was hastening away: but Octavian was almost immediately by her side, saying, "Will you not suffer me to learn who it is to whom I have been enabled to render the service which is deemed deserving of thanks?"

The young girl stopped short, and reflected gravely for a few moments. It was evident enough that she was deliberating whether she should tell her name: it was also evident that she feared it would savour of ingratitude and actual rudeness to decline;—for she at length observed slowly, "You have a right to ask this question, sir. My name is Christina Ashton."

"Then, Miss Ashton," at once responded Lord Octavian Meredith, "you will permit me to escort you to your own residence, for fear lest you should again encounter any individual who, wearing the garb of a gentleman, possesses the attributes of a ruffian, and is unable to appreciate the innocence and the respectability which ought to be a sufficient shield against such treatment as you ere now experienced."

"I should be sorry, Mr. Percival," answered the maiden, "to engross any more of your time. Pray suffer me to continue my way alone."

"Miss Ashton, I have read your thoughts—I have fathomed your intentions!" exclaimed Meredith. "You are going straight hence to a magistrate——Now, if I promise faithfully that I will not engage in a duel——"

"Alas, sir!" said Christina, "you cannot dispose of your own actions in this matter. I have read in books of that false code of honour which, belonging to a bygone barbarism, has been engrafted upon our modern civilization——"

"Miss Ashton, I entreat you not to take the step which you meditate!" interrupted Octavian. "Do you know that you would expose me to something far worse than the hazard of losing my life?—you would expose me to that of losing my honour? The world would call me coward; and I swear unto you that in spite of all the magisterial and police authority, I would vindicate my reputation and my character!"

"Ah, is it so?" murmured Christina mournfully: for she was smitten with the truth of what her deliverer had just said.

"You see therefore, Miss Ashton," resumed Octavian, "that if actually challenged by that person, I must go out with him. I will no longer attempt to deceive you: for such is the real truth. Do not however be alarmed on my account. If mortally wounded, I should in my last moments be rejoiced to think that I had rendered a service to an amiable young lady such as you are."

The tears started into Christina's eyes at the bare thought of a fellow-creature's existence—perhaps a most valuable one—being jeopardised or lost on her account; and moreover, for a naturally sensitive disposition and for a feeling heart, there was something irresistibly touching in the tone and manner in which Octavian had last addressed her. She still lingered,—forgetful in the agitation of her mind that the interview had already been too much prolonged, considering that she was standing there conversing with one who was almost a total stranger to her: for we should state that though she herself had on former occasions been noticed by Meredith, she had never observed him. Indeed, so far as she was concerned, she did not recollect having ever seen him before the present occasion.

"You perceive, therefore, Miss Ashton," continued Meredith, "that you really must suffer this matter to take its course; and that you would be doing me a positive injury by any direct interference. At the same time, I fully appreciate the generosity of your motives; and I feel myself bound to offer that you shall be made acquainted with the result. If I fall in the impending duel, some friend of mine shall wait upon you with the intelligence: but if I survive, I will do myself the pleasure of calling, to convince you personally of my safety."

Had Christina Ashton been less inexperienced than she was in the ways of the world, she would have penetrated this somewhat insidious and perhaps not altogether handsome endeavour to draw from her lips an avowal of the place of her abode: but artless and guileless herself, she was unsuspicious of underhand dealings on the part of others. The same motive which had prompted her to mention her name, now at once instigated her to mention her address: and having hastily done so, she again bowed and continued her way.

Meredith had no longer the faintest shadow of an excuse for detaining her—though he would gladly have gone on lingering in conversation with a being whose beauty had made such a deep im-

pression upon his heart. We must observe that these scenes had taken place in a portion of the Regent's Park which is seldom much frequented by persons either on foot or on horseback, even when the Park itself serves as a fashionable resort: but in the autumn season of the year the fashionable world were for the most part out of town—the Parks were well nigh deserted—and the particular spot where these incidents occurred, had not at the time a single individual passing that way, save and except Meredith, Christina, and the impudent libertine who had insulted her.

Octavian continued his way slowly towards his own house. On arriving there, he found the carriage in readiness, as he had promised to accompany Zoe for a drive. His first impulse was to make some excuse, as he wished to be alone with his own thoughts: but his natural generosity would not permit him to do this. He felt that he had no right to deprive his wife of his company, in consequence of any new or altered feelings which might have arisen within him—but that on the contrary, it was his duty to crush and stifle those feelings. This he earnestly resolved to do. He accompanied Zoe for the drive; and the various little evidences of the exquisite sweetness of her temper and the amiability of her disposition, which even the mere tenour of the conversation developed, filled him with remorseful feelings as he remembered all that had passed through his mind while he was with Christina. He forced himself to appear gay; and the unsuspecting Zoe fancied not that there was in reality an abstraction and a pre-occupation beneath that cheerful surface. He said nothing to her relative to the adventure which might probably lead to a duel. In the first place, a husband seldom or never imparts to a wife the chance of such a casualty; and in the second place, Octavian felt that he could not touch upon the subject without betraying some emotion while speaking of Christina.

At about nine o'clock in the evening, as Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith were sitting together in their drawing-room, taking their coffee, a servant entered; and presenting a card to his master, intimated that the gentleman whose name it bore requested to see him.

"Ah, Captain Whitby," said Octavian, with an air of assumed carelessness, so as to prevent his wife from suspecting there was anything wrong. "I will come down to him at once:"—and when the footman had left the room, he observed in the same easy indifferent manner, "The Captain has come to inquire into the character of a man I had with me previous to our marriage."

Octavian then descended to the dining-room, where Captain Whitby was waiting to see him. The gallant officer had called on behalf of the Hon. Wilson Stanhope, which it appeared was the name of the individual from whose libertine outrage Octavian had rescued Miss Ashton. Meredith penned a hasty note to the Duke of Marchmont, requesting him to act as his second; and this note he begged Captain Whitby to bear to his Grace, who would arrange all preliminaries.

"I have named time and place in my letter, Captain Whitby," added Meredith; "and as a matter of course, all parties engaged will observe the strictest secrecy with regard to the proceedings."

"Such is also Mr. Stanhope's wish," responded the Captain. "Mr. Stanhope frankly confesses that under the influence of a champagne-breakfast, he behaved rudely to the girl; and therefore, my lord, a single word of apology on your part for the blow you struck, will prevent this hostile meeting."

"And that word, Captain Whitby, will not be spoken by my lips," rejoined Meredith.

The Captain bowed and took his leave; while Octavian rejoined Zoe, who still saw nothing in his look or manner to create in her mind the slightest suspicion of what was going on.

It is not our purpose to give a detailed description of the duel. Suffice it to say that Octavian rose at an earlier hour than usual,—alleging that the fineness of the morning tempted him to a ride on horseback before breakfast; and having embraced Zoe, he took his departure. Mounted on his steed, and having dispensed with the attendance of his groom, he galloped to the place of meeting, where the Duke of Marchmont arrived at the same moment. A few minutes afterwards the Hon. Wilson Stanhope and Captain Whitby appeared upon the ground. They had brought a surgeon with them: but he remained in their carriage at a little distance. Shots were exchanged, neither party receiving any injury; and Mr. Stanhope declared that he was satisfied. The two principals then shook hands in the approved manner; and thus in five minutes all was over. Ere separating, it was agreed by those concerned that the utmost secrecy should be observed in respect to the affair; and thus not even a whisper transpired to reach a reporter's ears and engender a paragraph in the public journals.

Lord Octavian Meredith reached home at the usual breakfast-hour; and Zoe still remained without the slightest suspicion that her dearly beloved husband's life had been risked in a duel. We may add, ere closing this chapter, that Meredith had been compelled to inform his friend the Duke of Marchmont of the name and address of Miss Ashton: so that in case he had fallen, his promise might be kept, and the intelligence conveyed to the young lady. But Octavian had not chosen to confess that this Miss Ashton was the very self-same beauteous unknown of whom he had made mention when consulting the Duke in regard to his prospects, as described in a previous chapter.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LODGING-HOUSE.

In Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, a respectable lodging-house was kept by a widow-woman named Macaulay. She was about fifty years of age—short and stout—yet bustling and active; very untidy and dirty in her appearance during all the earlier part of the day—but dressed out in a very fine style for the afternoon and evening. She was a Scotch woman—exceedingly thrifty, and bent upon saving a penny here and a penny there to the utmost of her power. She therefore assisted the servants in the house-work and the kitchen: hence her morning's untidiness. But when

the onerous duties of the day were over, Mrs. Macaulay sported her silk gown, her cap with pink ribands, her gold watch and chain—and seated herself in her neat little ground-floor parlour, ready to receive any of her neighbours who might chance to drop in for a chat. Though parsimonious even to meanness—beating down her drudges of servants to the lowest possible amount of wages—she was an honest woman in her way, and made as little free with her lodgers' tea and sugar, butter, and other comestibles, as the most conscientious of her class. Neither did she altogether possess a bad heart, though it was steeled with many defences against accessibility with regard to money-matters. She would not mind sitting up all night long to nurse a sick lodger: but she would not at all like to hear the lodger, when rent-day came round, make an excuse for non-payment. Her landlord came to her regularly for his rent; and she therefore must have her's. The tax-gatherers were equally exact in their periodical visits; and she was compelled, as she alleged, to require a corresponding punctuality on the part of her tenants. Such was Mrs. Macaulay—a woman with whom lodgers were certain to remain on the best possible terms so long as their weekly bills were settled with regularity.

The ground-floor, consisting of two rooms, was occupied by herself,—the front being her parlour, the back her bed-chamber. The first floor was very handsomely furnished, and was sure to be "well let," as Mrs. Macaulay termed it, in the season—perhaps to a Member of Parliament, whose regular residence was in the country. The second floor was far more plainly appointed, but still comfortable enough; and above were the chambers of the servants—with a spare one in case the first-floor lodger should have a servant of his own.

It was about ten o'clock in the forenoon on the

very day that the duel took place, that a tall man, of gentlemanly appearance, and well though plainly dressed—that is to say, his apparel was genteel and of good materials, but without pretension—passed slowly along Mortimer Street; and observing a card in a window, announcing a first floor to let ready furnished, he knocked at the door. On one of the servants answering it, he requested to look at the rooms; and he was in the first instance shown into Mrs. Macaulay's parlour, while that respectable female "tidied herself up a bit"—to use her own phrase. Having washed her face and hands, slipped on her silk gown and her cap with pink ribands, Mrs. Macaulay entered the parlour, with a simpering mien and a half-curtsey. She prided herself upon being an excellent physiognomist: for she always scrutinized well every applicant for her lodgings—so that she might calculate the chances of being paid her rent, or of having her tenants decamp suddenly some fine day. As a matter of course such disagreeable incidents as these had been within the range of her experience; and by treasuring up in her mind the countenances of the delinquents, she regarded them as criterions for the formation of her judgment in future. Therefore, on entering into the presence of the gentleman to whom we have alluded, she studied him with all the keenness of her perception, yet without appearing to do so.

As we have said, he was of tall stature: we may add that he was of commanding aspect. His hair, which was of an iron gray, was worn much away from above the forehead, and was thin upon the crown. His whiskers, which were large, were a shade darker—yet quite gray at the roots. Handsome he might be considered, so far as the profile was concerned: but he had a cold stern look that was almost saturnine, and which chilled the beholder. His complexion appeared to be made up of sallowness bronzed with the sun. As for his age, it was by no means easy to fix it: he might be fifty—he might even be several years younger or older; but that which might have led to the former inference, was that he possessed a fine set of teeth which were well preserved. He was dressed in black; and over his shoulders there hung loosely a dark blue cloak. Though it was only the middle of October, the weather was still warmly genial, and the landlady therefore concluded he was an invalid or had lately been one, and thus sought to protect himself against the chance of taking cold. From the result of her survey, she could not exactly make up her mind as to whether she liked his appearance or not. He had the air of a gentleman: but then that cold severe stern look of his troubled and bewildered her. Besides, was not the Polish Count with an awful long name, and who turned out to be no Count at all, but only a wild Irish adventurer, and who had run away five pounds in her debt,—was not he a very gentlemanly man? while, on the other hand, did she not decline to receive as a lodger an elderly person, merely on account of his haughtily stern look—and had not this very individual lived for the last ten years with Mrs. Sifkin over the way, paying his rent as regularly as clock-work, and never venturing a hint that his tea and sugar disappeared rapidly, or that somehow or another something was always wanted though a store of it had been laid in only a day or two back? Therefore, it was no wonder if worthy Mrs. Macaulay was puzzled how to act in the present instance, and that the tall gentleman's countenance was one which seemed to defy her skill as a physiognomist.

"I see that you have apartments to let," he said: and the mildness of his voice, rich however in its sonorous harmony, and tinctured with a deep mournfulness, almost made her start: for she had expected that naught but the sternest accents could issue from those lips.

"Yes, sir," she responded, cheering up considerably, and again putting on the invariable simper of an obliging landlady: "I think you will find them excellent apartments. Is it for yourself and lady—or——"

"For myself only," replied the stranger; and he made a motion towards the door, as if impatient to view the apartments without further delay or discourse.

"I will show you the rooms, sir," continued Mrs. Macaulay: and as she led the way up the stairs, she muttered to herself, "Heavens! there's a broom where a broom should not be!" and then as she reached the landing, she suddenly opened a closet-door and thrust a pail into it, still muttering, "That slut Betsy! what *can* she be thinking of?"

The apartments were duly shown: the stranger merely flung a single glance round the drawing-room and the bed-chamber, which were on the same level—and expressed himself satisfied.

"The rent, sir, is four guineas a week—of course including attendance," said Mrs. Macaulay: "but for this sum you have a chamber up-stairs, in case you keep a servant of your own."

"I have none—and do not mean to keep any," answered the gentleman.

"Very good, sir—just as you think fit!" exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay. "You will find mine a very quiet house; and I need not say," she added, drawing herself up, "that it is of first-rate respectability. When should you like to come in, sir?"

"A word or two first, if you please," responded the stranger. "I am somewhat of an invalid, and seek quiet apartments. Have you any other lodgers in the house?"

"The floor above is let, sir—but to the nicest, quietest young people that you could wish to see."

"Have they children?" asked the stranger.

"They are brother and sister, sir," rejoined Mrs. Macaulay,—"quite young folks, and highly respectable: for they have never once missed paying their rent since they have been here—which is upwards of six months. They go up and down stairs as quiet as mice——"

"And you have no other lodgers?"

"None, sir. If you take these rooms, my lodgings will all be occupied. I only let out these two floors."

"Then I will take the apartments," said the gentleman; "and I shall come hither at once. My trunk is at an hotel hard by: I will go and send it——"

"Perhaps, sir," interposed Mrs. Macaulay, as the stranger was advancing to the door—and she spoke in a mild tone of subdued deprecation, as much as to imply that he must not take offence at

what she was about to say,—"perhaps you will favour me with a reference?"

"I have none to give—I am acquainted with no one in London—I am a total stranger here. But whatsoever sum in advance you require, you may have:"—and as the stranger thus spoke, he drew forth a well-filled purse.

"That is not exactly, sir, the same thing," observed Mrs. Macaulay: for she thought to herself, "Did not the gentleman with the red hair, who was no gentleman after all, pay me a fortnight in advance, and then manage to run into my debt ten pounds, in spite of all I could do? and when I asked him for a settlement, did he not run away with my plated coffee-pot and six silver spoons?"—so as the worthy landlady hastily reviewed these circumstances in her past experience, she was resolved to take warning therefrom in her present dealings.

"I am not offended," replied the stranger, in his mild gentlemanly voice, "that you should seek guarantees for the respectability of those who take apartments beneath your roof. Your conduct is in itself a guarantee that your house is a repectable one. I tell you again that I am a perfect stranger in London: but if you will call at the great bankers' in the Strand"—and he named the firm to which he alluded—"they will, I think, give you every satisfactory information. The apartments suit me; and as I have taken the trouble to look at them, and have given you the trouble to show them, I have no inclination to go searching elsewhere."

"I am very much obliged, sir," answered Mrs. Macaulay, now cheering up once more: "such a reference will be highly satisfactory. What name, if you please, sir?"

"Make your inquiries relative to Mr. Redcliffe," rejoined the gentleman: and he thereupon took his departure.

Mrs. Macaulay lost not a moment in proceeding to the bankers'; and on putting the inquiry to one of the clerks at the counter, she was referred to a gentleman in an inner room. She did not much like this, and again her spirits fell: for she thought that if her would-be lodger had an account at the bank, the clerks must all be prepared to answer any inquiries. However, she put her question to the gentleman to whom she was thus introduced in the private room; and he, having listened to her, gravely turned over the leaves of a huge book which lay open before him.

"I know nothing of Mr. Redcliffe," he at length said.

"Then I am robbed of my time, and should have been swindled out of my rent!" ejaculated the irate Mrs. Macaulay. "Who knows but that he would have walked off with another coffee-pot and another six silver spoons?"

"Stop, stop, my good woman!" interrupted the banker, with an imperious wave of his pen: "you should have patience. I was going to say that I know nothing of Mr. Redcliffe personally—nor who he is—nor what he is. But this I *do* know—that I have upwards of one hundred thousand pounds in my hands, to the account of that gentleman."

"Ah, dear me!" said Mrs. Macaulay, scarcely able to speak through utter amazement. "A hundred thousand pounds!—and I who was afraid of my plated coffee-pot and my silver spoons!"

"I think, ma'am," resumed the banker, "that if you have Mr. Redcliffe as a lodger—always supposing him to be the same Clement Redcliffe whose name figures in my book—you run no risk of losing your coffee-pot or your silver spoons."

The banker then bowed slightly, but with the unmistakable air of a man who had no more to say, and whose time was precious. Mrs. Macaulay thereupon took her leave; and entering an omnibus, was borne in the direction of her own residence. But during the ride fresh misgivings gradually arose in the mind of this very cautious, and indeed suspicious woman. What if after all the individual who had taken her apartments, was not the real Clement Redcliffe? what if he were some swindler, who having learnt that a gentleman of such a name had money at the bank, but was not known there, had availed himself of such information to pass himself off as the veritable Mr. Redcliffe? She worked herself up to such a pitch of suspicion and mistrust that she was half-inclined to refuse to receive the gentleman. She thought it so odd that a man worth upwards of one hundred thousand pounds, should be without a single acquaintance in London. She could scarcely believe it was so; and therefore regarded it as an excuse on the part of an impostor for not giving any other reference than the one to the banker. But then, as she entered Mortimer Street—glanced at Mrs. Sifkins' over the way—and thought of how she had over-reached herself by her suspicions in respect to the old gentleman who had taken her rival's lodgings, had lived there for years, had paid his rent regularly, and never looked into his tea-caddy,—she endeavoured to reason herself against her present mistrust. In short, the result was that she decided in the gentleman's favour—though not without a lingering apprehension in her mind that she was doing wrong and that he would turn out a swindler after all. The new lodger's luggage presently arrived from the neighbouring hotel; and as Mrs. Macaulay was on the look-out for the porter who brought it, she beckoned the man into her parlour, gave him a glass of gin—not forgetting to take one herself likewise—and began to question him.

"Who is this Mr. Redcliffe?" she inquired.

"Don't know, ma'am, nothink about the gentleman—only that he has paid all the servants in a werry 'andsome manner."

"How long has he been at your hotel?"

"Why, he come fust of all a matter of six or seven weeks back, I should think, as near as I can recollect. But he only stayed a few days, and was shut up in his room looking over all the old files of newspapers he could possibly get hold of. We have filed the *Times* at our place for the last twenty year: and, bless me! if I don't think he must have read it all through—for he was always poring over it from morning to night. The head-waiter said as how he thought the gentleman was either a politician studying politics—or else fancied hisself to be the heir-at-law of a fortune, and was looking out for the advertisements to the next-of-kin—or else that he must have been abroad a many years, and on coming home wanted to see what had took place in his absence."

"How strange!" said Mrs. Macaulay: then as

her own ideas always settled on money-matters, she added, "I will be bound it was the advertisements he was looking after—and that he has got his fortune, and that's the money that has been paid into the bankers'! Well, but you say he only stayed with you a few days first of all?"

"No more he did," responded the hotel-porter; "and he set off one day into the country with only a little carpet-bag, observing that he should be back in a short time. He did not pay his bill when he went away, but seemed desperate hurried. Five or six weeks passed, and the governor" —meaning the landlord—"began to think he was gammoned, and that the gentleman's great big trunk might only have brick-bats and straw in it arter all, and that he had took away his shirts and what not in the carpet-bag."

"And a very reasonable suspicion too," observed Mrs. Macaulay. "I should have entertained it long before the six weeks were up. But go on."

"Well, ma'am, it was on'y yesterday morning," continued the porter, "that the governor, finding his customer didn't come back, decided on breaking open the trunk; and he calls me to get a jimmy—that's a crow-bar, you know, ma'am—to do it. So, just as I was going up-stairs with the jimmy, a cab stops at the door; and who the deuce should walk in but Mr. Redcliffe, followed by the jarvey with the carpet-bag. So I slips the jimmy up my back, under my coat, and makes my bow as Mr. Redcliffe passes. Wasn't the governor glad that he hadn't come a few minutes later!—for if he had, the trunk would have been opened as sure as a gun."

"I know I should have opened it at the end of the first week," interjected Mrs. Macaulay. "Well, what next?"

"Why, ma'am, just now—about an hour back —Mr. Redcliffe rings and orders his bill. Now, don't you see, his trunk had been standing in his bed-room for the whole six weeks he had been absent: so of course the governor charges him for the use of the room the whole time. The waiter didn't much like taking up the bill—though he's got plenty of brass, that self-same waiter has. But Mr. Redcliffe just glanced at the amount, threw down some bank-notes, and paid the bill without an instant's hesitation."

"That's just what I like!" ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay, resolving that her own bills should not be stinted in items, and with a quick mental glance perceiving in a moment how a few little extras could easily be stuck on.

"And I'm blessed, ma'am," continued the hotel porter, "if Mr. Redcliffe didn't pay all the servants just as though he had been stopping at the hotel the whole six weeks."

"Take another glass of Hollands," exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay, becoming bounteous in her exuberant glee at having such a lodger, and in finding all her suspicions most completely allayed.

The man quaffed the strong waters—carried the huge trunk up-stairs—and then took his departure. Shortly afterwards Mr. Redcliffe made his appearauce, and at once took possession of his apartments,—Mrs. Macaulay having in the meantime put on her Sunday apparel, including a new cap with pink ribbons, in order to give him the best welcome possible.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TWINS.

At the same time that Mr. Redcliffe thus arrived at his new lodging, the occupants of the second floor, to whom Mrs. Macaulay had alluded, were seated together at a table, on which were books and needlework. The room was tolerably well furnished for a second floor, and was at least quite comfortable. The two inmates were a brother and a sister; and even a superficial observer would have seen that they were twins. We need not enter into any lengthy description of the sister, inasmuch as we have already described her: for she was none other than that same Christina Ashton on whose account Lord Octavian Meredith fought a duel. We may however remind the reader that she appeared to be between sixteen and seventeen years of age, and that she was exquisitely beautiful.

Christina's brother was an exceedingly prepossessing youth: he had large dark eyes, similar to those of his sister; and though perhaps his hair was not of the same intense darkness, it nevertheless had an almost equally fine natural gloss upon it. Like herself, he possessed a superb set of teeth; and his countenance was pale—not with a sickly pallor, but with that absence of a florid hue which is usually characteristic of youthful faces when set off by dark hair and eyes. Christina's figure had as yet all the slenderness and willowy elasticity of her tender youthfulness,—at the same time promising to expand, as she approached more nearly to womanhood, into rich developments. The bust had already its nascent contours,—carefully concealed by the modest apparel which ascended to the very throat;—and that throat, how sweetly beautiful! how transparently white! The youth's figure was likewise slender, symmetrically formed, and promising as his own years also advanced, to be of well-knit manly proportions. There was a remarkable similitude between this brother and sister—not only in respect to personal appearance, but also with regard to their minds and dispositions. They had been well educated: they were naturally intelligent—and they had intellectual tastes. They were devoted to each other; and thus, when the sister was occupied with her needlework, the brother read to her from some book which was calculated to instruct as well as to amuse.

Over the countenances of both there was the slightest possible shade of pensiveness, which at times even deepened into melancholy: but when they caught this profounder expression on each other's face, they would instantaneously brighten up, as if it were a tacit consent between them that they should avoid mutually saddening influences. There is always something interesting about twins: there is sure to be a deep affection existing between them—and most generally a strong physical similitude: their tastes too, and the casts of their minds, generally have much about them that is identical:—but perhaps in no case were all these characteristics so profoundly stamped, so marked, so visible, as in that of which we are speaking. Very interesting therefore was this youthful pair; and as if nothing should be

wanting to sustain the impression of their twin-condition, an identity of name had been observed with regard to them so far as the difference of the sex would permit: for the brother was denominated Christian, and the reader is already aware that the sister was called Christina.

We introduce them in the afternoon of the day following Christina Ashton's adventure in the Regent's Park—and therefore the same on which the duel had been fought in the morning. Christina had of course told her brother every particular—for they had no secrets from each other; and now, when occasionally glancing up from his book, he perceived that she was evidently somewhat restless and uneasy, he could full well divine the cause thereof. At first he forbore allusion to it,—fearing to rivet her thoughts too completely upon the subject: but when he observed her restlessness increasing, he laid down his book, and said in a plaintive voice, "I wish, dearest sister, that you were relieved from this anxiety."

"It is a dreadful thing, Christian," she responded mournfully, as the tears started into her beautiful dark eyes, "to reflect that lives have possibly been risked—and even lost—by this time, and entirely on my account."

"But did not Mr. Percival promise that you should be made acquainted with the result?" asked the brother: "and depend upon it, that if anything fatal had occurred we should know it by this time. Mr. Percival did not tell you where he resided, I think?—for if he had, I would go and make some inquiry in his neighbourhood."

"No," responded Christina: "he suspected that I purposed to inform the authorities and prevent the duel."

"Ah, my dear sister," exclaimed Christian, "it was the first time you ever went out alone during the whole six months we have been in London; and it shall be the last!"

"You were so occupied with your drawing, you know, Christian," answered his sister, "that I did not like to take you away from it; and as the Regent's Park is so near, I thought there was no harm for me to go alone as far as Mr. Preston's. Besides, you had forgotten that it was the day for receiving our monthly money; and so you were not ready dressed to go out. The hour had arrived when the money was to be called for; and you are aware how severe and particular—indeed how cross and stern Mr. Preston is, and how particular he was in enjoining us always to come to the very day and to the very hour—otherwise he should be offended."

"Well, my dear sister, another time," responded Christian, "I will be sure to recollect when pay-day comes round; and I will be ready to go out with you to the very hour. But I forgot to ask you—did Mr. Preston prove more communicative——"

"Than on former occasions?" asked Christina. "No—not at all. He was abrupt and hurried as he always is—curt enough, without being absolutely rude. I lingered with the intention of asking him a few questions: but he quickly bowed me out—and the servant was in readiness to open the front door."

"How I dislike all this mystery!" exclaimed Christian, the natural sweetness of his temper being for a moment ruffled by a vexation which may be understood from the remarks he went on to make. "I cannot lead a life of idleness. I long to be placed in some position that will enable me to earn something. If it be charity we are dependent upon, the sooner we escape from such a humiliating position, the better: but if it be that our dear deceased uncle, on dying so suddenly, left us some property, and that this Mr. Preston is his executor, and so to speak, our guardian—I wish he would tell us exactly how we are situated and what we have to rely upon—much or little. I am determined, Christina, that when the monthly pay-day comes round again, I will ask firmly—but of course respectfully—for some little information on these points."

"Yes—you shall do so, Christian," was the sister's response. "It was a year last Monday," she added, with a sigh, "that our dear uncle was smitten with death in so shocking a manner—and only last Monday therefore that we put off the mourning we had worn for him."

"And during all this time," added Christian, "we have learnt no more of the circumstances in which we were left by Mr. Ashton, than we knew on the very day of his demise—unless it be that Mr. Preston became in some way or another interested in our behalf. Ah! I hoped when, six months back, he sent for us to come up from our own pleasant little village to this great metropolis, that it was to do something for me—to give me a profession or an employment—to put me in a way to carve out for myself some career suitable to my tastes. But no!—nothing of the sort! Here we have been six months in these lodgings; and I am no farther advanced in my hopes than I was on the day of our arrival. But, Ah! I must not repine: it is perhaps wicked in me to do so: for we have enough to support us comfortably—and our wants being limited, twelve guineas a month are a little fortune."

"I am not sorry, dearest brother, to hear you speak now and then in a way which proves that you possess proper manly aspirations:"—and as Christina uttered these words, her looks were bent with inexpressible fondness, mingled with a sisterly admiration, upon Christian.

At this moment one of the servants of the household entered the room, and said, "Please, Miss, here's a gentleman inquiring for you. He says he is Mr. Percival."

"Then he is safe!" murmured Christina, with a look of profound thankfulness: while her brother bade the servant show the gentleman up.

But while Lord Octavian Meredith is ascending the stairs, we must avail ourselves of the opportunity to describe under what circumstances he still preserved his feigned name of Percival, and meant to retain it while visiting Christina. The reader already knows that he had all along been deeply enamoured of the young girl while she was still to him only "his fair unknown"—and that he had deluded himself in respect to the real nature of the sentiments which he experienced towards Zoe. That unexpected meeting with Christina in the Park, had torn the veil from his eyes, and had cleared his mental vision to the full perception of the grievous mistake he had made. In short, he could not conceal from himself that he was deeply attached to Christina Ashton—that he loved her with an enthusiasm it was im-

possible for him to restrain; and though his duty towards Zoe, and his duty towards Christina herself, should have led him to avoid the dangers of another interview,—he had not the moral courage —he had not indeed sufficient control over himself, to resist the temptation of calling upon the object of his passion. To do the young nobleman justice, the idea of a deliberate seduction had not for a single instant entered his head:—in his infatuation he thought of nothing but the pleasure of beholding Christina again—of contemplating her beauty—of listening to the sweet music of her voice. Yet there was a whisper in his soul that this visit which he was now paying, would not be the last: for he could not possibly make up his mind to the bold and resolute step of avoiding her in future. Yet to announce his real name—to proclaim himself Lord Octavian Meredith—would be to furnish her with the means of ascertaining that he was already married,—a circumstance which an accident at any moment might bring to her knowledge. And if the truth did thus come to her ears, he could not again hope to be received by her: whereas, if disguised under the name of Percival, he might entertain the hope of being occasionally permitted to call in Mortimer Street. Thus it was without any deliberately wicked plan—without any positively settled design against the virtue of the young girl—but merely in obedience to an infatuation which he could not possibly control—Lord Octavian Meredith secured to himself the advantage which his feigned name gave him in the matter.

It was not until Meredith entered the young people's sitting-room, that he entertained any particular idea of whom he should find with Christina —whether she was living with parents or relatives—nor indeed in what circumstances she was placed,—save and except that he knew she had a brother, with whom he had seen her walking on a few occasions, as he had stated to the Duke of Marchmont. He had longed to ask the servant who opened the door, some few questions: but he was fearful that such curiosity, on being reported to those whom it concerned, would act prejudicially against him: and therefore he had abstained.

"According to my promise, Miss Ashton," he said, as he entered the apartment, "I am here to make you aware of my safety."

He extended his hand towards the young girl, who gave him her's with an ingenuous frankness: for she felt that she lay under a deep obligation to one who had delivered her from a gross insult —and who, by the very words which had just fallen from his lips, had evidently been compelled to risk his life on her account.

In the same artless manner she renewed her thanks for his chivalrous conduct; and timidly but sincerely expressed her delight that no serious consequences had ensued.

"None, Miss Ashton," answered Meredith. "I went out with Mr. Stanhope,—for that is the name of the gentleman who insulted you; and no harm was done. I need not ask if this be your brother:"—and thus speaking, he turned toward Christian, to whom he with well-bred affability proffered his hand,—which was accepted with all the frankness of unsuspicious youth.

Octavian sat down, and began conversing with the twins upon a variety of topics. He learnt from them that they had been six months in the metropolis—that their parents had been long dead—that they were brought up by an uncle, a gentleman of some little property, who dwelt in a remote village in the northern part of England—and that they possessed not, to their knowledge, any relations now upon the face of the earth. These little pieces of information came out during the discourse: but the twins did not mention whence their present resources were derived,—and Lord Octavian did not seek by any insidious dexterity to fathom the matter. He saw that they were all ingenuousness, frankness, and inexperience; and he was fearful of shocking the delicate fibres of their minds by the display of aught savouring of undue curiosity. On rising to take his leave, he requested permission to call occasionally when he might happen to be passing that way. Christina gave no response: but Christian, delighted at what he considered a display of the kindliest and friendliest feeling, cheerfully proclaimed his assent.

Lord Octavian Meredith had not taken his departure many minutes—and the twins were in the midst of self-congratulations that the duel had resulted without injury to either party—when Mrs. Macaulay burst somewhat suddenly into the room, with a visible consternation depicted upon her countenance. The brother and sister both surveyed her in alarm; and she hastened to exclaim, "Have I not heard you say, my dear young gentleman and lady, that Mr. Preston of the Regent's Park is your friend—or guardian—or something of the sort?"

A quick affirmative burst from the lips of the twins; and it was with increased suspense, mingled even with terror, that they surveyed Mrs. Macaulay: for they were smitten with the presentiment that something serious had happened.

"Do tell me," she went on to exclaim,—"has Mr. Preston got much money of yours in his hands?"

"We do not know," was Christian's response. "Indeed, we are utterly uninformed on the subject. But what has occurred?"

"I am really very much afraid it will be a sad blow for you," she said. "Now, don't alarm yourselves—I mean, don't excite yourselves too much—though I dare say it will be exciting enough——"

"But what *has* occurred?" asked Christina, almost goaded to torture with anxiety. "Do not keep us in suspense!"

"Mr. Preston has run away," responded Mrs. Macaulay: "he has committed forgeries to an immense amount—placards are posted up offering a reward for his apprehension—I have just seen one—and as the name struck me, I was fearful it might be *your* Mr. Preston. And it is too!—there is no doubt! Joseph Preston, of Cambridge Terrace?"

Yes—it was the same; and this announcement came like a thunderbolt upon the brother and sister. For upwards of a minute they stood contemplating Mrs. Macaulay in blank dismay: then, as if simultaneously smitten by the same sentiment, which prompted them to seek consolation from each other, they locked themselves in a fond embrace. Mrs. Macaulay's worst fears were con-

firmed from the effect which her intelligence had produced upon the twins. We have already said that she did not positively possess a bad heart: but her better feelings were almost completely over-ruled by her love of gain and her fear of loss,—so that while on the one hand she really pitied the orphans, yet on the other she was already wondering to herself whether they could possibly think of keeping on their lodgings, and whether the rental of twenty-five shillings a week would be thenceforth safe?

"Don't you think you had better go at once," she suggested, "to Mr. Preston's house? I dare say the police are in possession of it; and you can at all events find out whether he has left behind him any papers regarding yourselves."

Christian and Christina were at once struck by the excellence of this advice, and by the necessity of immediately following it. Mrs. Macaulay slowly retired from the room; and the twins,—having again embraced each other, and whispered words of hope and consolation in each other's ears,—hastened to their respective chambers to dress for going out. In a few minutes they were ready; and they sallied forth together. As they proceeded along, arm-in-arm, towards the Regent's Park, they spoke but little: yet they were constantly turning their handsome dark eyes upon each other, to infuse mutual encouragement by their looks. Each strove to assume an air of as much cheerfulness as possible, for the sake of the other: but both in their hearts entertained deep misgivings lest the crimes of Mr. Preston should prove ruinous to themselves. Many a passenger in the street lingered to gaze upon that interesting pair,—that young damsel with the sylphid form—that youth with the slender graceful shape, both endowed with so high an order of beauty—and their twin condition being at a glance recognisable. But they saw not that they were thus the objects of such interest,—an interest all the deeper, inasmuch as there was trouble but too evident in their countenances, despite all their efforts to conceal it.

We may here pause to observe that the Mr. Preston who has been mentioned, was a man of about fifty—short and slight—of exceeding bustling habits, and with a thorough business-like air. He had possessed a counting-house in the City; and his private residence was one of the mansions on Cambridge Terrace in the Regent's Park. He had ever been reputed a rich man: but, unlike Mr. Armytage, he had cared little or nothing for brilliant society, and had never courted it. Perhaps if his affairs had long been failing, he might have located himself in the Regent's Park with the hope of sustaining the impression that he was really wealthy, rather than for the purpose of mingling in the fashionable world. He was unmarried and childless; and thus, fortunately, he had no close connexions to be involved in his ruin and disgraced by it.

Christian and Christina reached Cambridge Terrace; and their summons at the front door was answered by a police-constable. From him they learnt that Mr. Preston had committed forgeries to the amount of thirty thousand pounds, as already ascertained—and that it was suspected there were other cases which were yet to transpire. It was only at an early hour in the morning of this same day that the forgeries were discovered by some gentleman in the financial world: and when the police, on receiving the information, had arrived at Cambridge Terrace to apprehend the culprit, they found that he had absconded during the past night. In addition to these particulars, Christian and Christina learnt that no papers of any consequence at all had been discovered either at the dwelling in Regent's Park, or at the office in the City; but that in Mr. Preston's bedroom at the former, there were traces of a considerable number of documents having been purposely burnt in the grate.

Such were the particulars gleaned from the police-constable; and the twins passed away from the mansion,—slowly and in silence. They walked some distance before they even dared to glance towards each other: they felt that their ruin had been accomplished. At length their looks met: tears filled the eyes of both—and they would have flung themselves into each other's arms, were it not a public place and people were proceeding hither and thither.

"Let us not despond, dearest sister," said Christian, suddenly wiping his eyes. "That which Mr. Preston did not do for me, I must now endeavour to achieve for myself. I will seek for a situation that may enable me to earn at least something; and I will work hard, dear Christina, to keep us both in respectability."

"And I too will work, Christian," replied the sister. "No—we will not despond!—we have the advantage of a good education, and it will be hard indeed if we cannot earn our bread by our industry."

The brother and sister were inspired with courage by the resolve to which they had thus come. The tears no longer stood in their eyes: their hearts were no longer smitten with sadness. They had a fond reliance upon each other: they had faith in heaven;—youth moreover is not the age which is prone to despair; and thus they were even happy. As they proceeded homeward, they discussed the plans which they should immediately pursue. They agreed that it would be no longer prudent to occupy a lodging at twenty-five shillings a week; and they decided on speaking at once to Mrs. Macaulay about giving it up. When they reached Mortimer Street, their landlady, who was somewhat anxiously on the look-out for them, hastened to open the front door, and invited them into her own parlour. They frankly explained their position—expressed their desire to remove as speedily as possible into a cheaper lodging—and with equal candour informed Mrs. Macaulay that they were now entirely dependent on themselves. They possessed a good stock of clothes; and they had some fourteen or fifteen pounds in hand—besides a few articles of jewellery of some little value.

"Well, my poor children," said Mrs. Macaulay, "I am sure I am exceedingly sorry for you; and if there is anything in the world I can do to help you, it shall be done. I know a very worthy widow-woman who lives in a small house in Park Street, Camden Town; and I happen to be aware that her lodgings are at this very moment to let. You would get two nice rooms for ten shillings a week; and you may give me as a reference. As for your lodgings here, I won't be hard upon you,

considering how you are situated. You have just entered a new week: besides which, I am entitled to another clear week's notice: but we will say nothing about the notice—and therefore if you pay me the week I shall be satisfied. I should however advise you to leave as soon as you can: —not, my dear children, that I want to get rid of you, but because the sooner you begin to economise in every way, the better for yourselves. And so, Miss, you would like to get needlework? Well, and very praiseworthy too! I should recommend you to apply to Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier in the City. Any one will tell you where it is; and you are certain to get employment there. But as for you, Master Ashton, I really am at a loss what to suggest. If I hear of anything, I will let you know. And now let me offer you each a glass of wine and a piece of cake: and then you had better go and see Mrs. Giles in Park Street at once."

Mrs. Macaulay was gratefully thanked for all the advice she had tendered; but the proffered refreshments were declined, as the twins were resolved to delay not a moment in carrying out their new plans. They accordingly set off again through the Regent's Park, to Camden Town; and when they were gone, Mrs. Macaulay, who never let the grass grow under her feet, put up in her window a card announcing "Furnished Lodgings to Let." She experienced a slight twinge of conscience at having bargained for the twenty-five shillings for the rent of the current week,—seeing that it was only just entered upon, and that the orphans would most likely move away in the evening or early on the morrow, so that she would have the chance of letting her rooms again at once. But she tranquillized that remorseful feeling by the reflection that she *might* have demanded a clear week's notice—or, in default thereof, an additional sum of twenty-five shillings. And then too, the offer of the cake and wine was another salve for her conscience. It was true that it had been declined: but it was the young people's look-out—the offer had not been the less made—and she was enabled to congratulate herself on her own generosity. So, altogether, Mrs. Macaulay came to the conclusion that she had acted kindly rather than with harshness; and she proceeded to regale herself with the good things which had been refused by the orphans.

In about a couple of hours they returned,—having made arrangements with Mrs. Giles; and they began to pack up their things for the purpose of removing that very same evening.

It was about nine o'clock—their boxes were all in readiness—and a cab was at the door to receive the luggage and bear the orphans away to their new and much humbler home. They flung a last look round the apartments which they were now quitting, to assure themselves that they were leaving nothing of their own behind; and as their eyes met, a sentiment of sadness simultaneously smote them both,—an identity of feeling, to the effect that it seemed as if they were suddenly going down in the world—or at all events that the battle of life was now about to commence. But they embraced each other; and again were they cheered by that profound fondness which inspired mutual trustfulness and reliance; and hand-in-hand they issued forth from the sitting-room. They descended the stairs; and just as they reached the landing of the first floor, the door of the front apartment opened—and Mr. Redcliffe, enveloped in his cloak, and with his hat on his head, appeared upon the threshold,—he being about to go forth. His dark eyes were at once riveted upon the brother and sister; and there was something about them which immediately inspired him with a strong interest on their behalf.

"I presume," he said, "that you are my fellow-lodgers, of whom the landlady spoke to me this morning in such pleasing terms?"

Christian answered to the effect that he and his sister had hitherto lodged in the house—but that now they were about to remove elsewhere.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Redcliffe, in a melancholy tone. "I am sorry for that. It would have pleased me to form your acquaintance."

But having thus spoken, he bowed—and hurrying abruptly down the stairs, issued forth from the house. Yet the bow was one of well-bred courtesy, accompanied by a melancholy smile, and with a look plainly showing the interest which even in a few swift brief minutes had been inspired in him by the appearance of the twins.

"He is a strange man—a very strange man!" said Mrs. Macaulay, who, standing at the foot of the stairs at the time to bid the orphans good-bye, had overheard what just passed. "He is enormously rich however; and that is a great consolation—for I am not usually fond of eccentric people. And now farewell, my young friends; and whenever you happen to be passing, do just drop in and tell me how you are getting on. But mind and don't forget Mr. Samuel Emanuel, Miss Ashton!"

The orphans took their leave of Mrs. Macaulay —entered the cab—and were driven away towards their new home.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EASTERN LADY.

THE scene changes to a small but exceedingly neat villa-residence in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill. It stood considerably apart from the other dwellings that were nearest,—and in the midst of a somewhat spacious garden, which was surrounded by a wall, with the exception of that part which fronted the road, and where there were iron railings. But within these railings the evergreens and shrubs were so thickly grouped, and were so high, as to form as complete a barrier against observation from passers-by as if the wall itself had been continued there. Two iron gates opened upon a semicircular carriage-sweep: the lawn, the gardens, and the gravel-walks were in excellent order. On one side of the house were the stables—on the other side a large conservatory, filled with rare exotics. The windows of the dwelling had all Venetian blinds; and these, especially in the drawing and dining-rooms, were usually kept closed throughout the day as well as the night. The villa was approached by a bye-road leading out of the main one which intersects Notting Hill, and from which the villa itself was

about half a mile distant. So few were the persons who ever passed along that bye-road—unless it were labourers to and from their work—that Shrubbery Villa, as the place was called, was in a comparatively perfect seclusion on that particular outskirt of the multitudinous metropolis. Thus the occupants were sufficiently far removed from the observation of any curious or gossiping neighbours; and for any one courting such seclusion, it was the very place to enjoy it.

We have spoken of it as it might be seen in the daytime: but it is in the evening, when the veil of darkness was upon the earth, that we are about to introduce our readers to a portion of its interior.

An apartment on the first floor, at the back of the drawing-room, and therefore looking on the garden in the rear, was fitted up in the most exquisite style. This style was altogether oriental: for instead of chairs, there was a continuous range of ottomans against the walls, interrupted only by the doorway in one direction and by the casement in another. The Venetian blinds were closed outside that casement: and within, heavy folds of the richest crimson drapery kept out the slightest current of air. A lamp, suspended to the ceiling, shed a soft roseate light through the transparent medium of a pink-tinted globe of glass. The atmosphere was warm and perfumed—but neither heated nor sickly. It was just such a warmth as was grateful on an October evening—and such a perfume as was refreshing, for it exhaled from flowers artistically arranged in costly vases. Some of those flowers were of that rare exotic kind which are seldom seen in this country, and then only in the conservatories of wealthy mansions. The mantel-piece was covered with superb ornaments, all of an oriental kind: the central table displayed the most curious as well as the most costly luxuries of eastern art.

But who was the occupant of this apartment at once so sumptuous and so elegant? whose form was it that sate half-reclined upon the crimson draperies of an ottoman? A female, the reader may be assured: for naught save feminine taste could preside over the appointments of that charming retreat. She was a lady of about thirty years of age; and though the duskiness of her complexion indicated her oriental origin, yet the warm languid clime to which she belonged, had not in any way marred or impaired the dazzling grandeur of her beauty. Her costume was of extraordinary richness, and well fitted for the place in which we find her. It was in some respects a fanciful dress: for those who are best acquainted with the apparel of different nations, could scarcely ascribe it to any one in particular. The taste of the wearer had evidently studied to blend all those details of costume which, belonging to different parts of the East, were most elegant and becoming in such combination. And that same taste, too, had so exquisitely presided over these arrangements, that there was nothing incongruous in the general effect.

A sort of caftan, of purple velvet, jewelled and embroidered, formed the upper garment—coming up nearly to the throat, and reaching down almost to the knees,—confined at the waist with a diamond-clasp of incalculable price, and again fastened by a similar though smaller brooch at the throat itself. The interval remaining open, would have left the bosom almost completely bare, were it not for an under-garment of embroidered blue silk, which reached up to the middle of the bust, but still left revealed to the eye no inconsiderable portion of those superb contours. The arms were bare to the shoulder; and they might have been thought somewhat too robust, were it not for their faultless sculptural modelling. They were circled with bracelets studded with gems, and of the most curious workmanship. The hands of this lady were of extraordinary beauty in respect to their chiselling: the fingers were long and tapering—the nails exquisitely almond-shaped, and of a pellucid pink.

But we must continue with the costume. She wore satin trousers of a pale pink, covered with the richest lace. They were full, in the oriental style, and were tied just below the swell of the leg,—bulging out so as to conceal the robust proportions of the limbs: but the admirable symmetry thereof might be judged by the faultless modelling of the ankles and the feet. Those ankles were bare—for she wore no stockings; and the feet were thrust into delicate red morocco slippers, braided, and ornamented with pearls. The first glance at this lady, as she lounged half-reclining against the floculent massiveness of the crimson-coloured cushions, would show the most superficial observer that no corset imprisoned her fine form. But then, no observer who had the good fortune to be admitted into her presence, *could* possibly be a superficial one: he would survey her until his eyes had embraced every fanciful peculiarity of her garb and every charm of her person. He would see, therefore, that if she wore no corset—neither did she require any. No artificial support was needed for those contours which remained, in their richness and firmness, where nature had placed them, like those of a sculptured effigy, yet with the rising and sinking which denoted the animation of the living form. Neither did she need the accessories of art to set off the rounded and flowing outlines of her figure: its own symmetrical proportions imparted the finest shapeliness to the dress, which in its turn so well became them and set them off to such advantage. She was not above the middle height of woman; and yet she appeared taller on account of her remarkably well modelled figure and her apparel, as well as from the statutesque elegance and graceful majesty of her gait and carriage.

Thus far have we described the occupant of that room of oriental luxury. But we must endeavour to render equal justice, by means of minutest detail, to the gorgeous splendour of her personal charms. We have already said that her complexion was of eastern duskiness: but yet it had naught of gipsy swarthiness:—it might be better likened to that of the Spaniard or Italian when in its darkest shade of bistre—yet with a skin perfectly transparent, and the warm blood showing through as it mantled with richest carnation tint upon the cheeks. Perhaps the hue of her complexion would be even still better understood, if we describe it as a clear pale brown: for it had in it none of the sallowness which blends with the olive skin; and the skin itself had all the fineness and polish of a youthful freshness still adhering to a mature and voluptuous womanhood. The reader may have expected to learn that she wore an oriental turban upon her head: but it was not so. A golden network, curiously interwoven with diamonds and pearls—the entire ornament itself constituting a fortune—rested lightly upon that head: but the hair was not gathered up beneath the network—it was parted in the middle with a careful exactitude, and flowed down in long heavy tresses upon her shoulders and her back. Dark as night was that hair—black as jet too, with no gloss upon it: yet was it neither harsh nor coarse, but as soft as silk—without wave or curl, save and except towards the extremity of the luxuriant tresses, and there the curl was rich and natural. Her forehead was not high—but yet expansive enough to give dignity to the countenance: the nose was perfectly straight—the nostrils of the tint of the rose-leaf. The upper lip was short: and both lips appeared to have been cut by the sculptor's chisel into their classical perfection: the shape of the mouth, when the whole face was in a state of repose or of seriousness, was that of Cupid's bow. The chin was delicately rounded; and the countenance formed a complete oval. The eyes were large and dark—full of a languishing lustre—the orbs set in whites of that bluish tint which seems like mother-of-pearl. The eyebrows were magnificently arched—the lashes of exceeding length, and forming the richest fringes that ever shaded those orbs which are at once the mirror and the artillery of woman's soul. When the mouth, which was so exquisitely formed, parted its rich red lips, teeth were disclosed which were whiter than ivory and faultlessly even. If the hand of this superb creature disturbed the luxuriant masses of hair on either side of her head, a small well-folded ear would be revealed; and thus in every respect was she a perfect model of oriental splendour and loveliness, combined in that one female form.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the

evening—as we have already stated—that we introduce our readers to the occupant of that elegantly furnished apartment within the walls of Shrubbery Villa. The lady herself seemed to be profoundly pensive at one interval—then somewhat excited and anxious at another. Several times in the space of a quarter of an hour, did she consult an elegant watch, set round with diamonds, and which being retained by a massive gold chain, she took from within the bosom of her caftan. Every now and then too, her eyes—usually of so melting and languid a lustre—would flash with sudden fires, as if reflecting an inward impatience of the soul; and once when she had consulted her watch, she murmured in some oriental tongue, "Time passes, and he comes not!"

But the voice in which she spoke these few words, and so lowly to herself, was of a rich flute-like harmony that would have given a charm to any language, even the harshest and the most discordant. It was a voice which, once heard, never could be forgotten,—one of those feminine voices which sink down into the very soul like the last notes of a strain of music, leaving rapture and ecstacy behind, yet half-subdued and kept under by the hope of catching the delicious sound again.

Presently this lady agitated a silver bell which lay near her, and a Hindoo ayah, or female-dependant, entered the room. This woman was about five-and-twenty—tall, slender, and beautifully formed, with the well-knit symmetry and the lithe elasticity of a bayadere. Her countenance, too—though many, many shades darker than the complexion of her mistress—was exceedingly handsome. Her eyes were so full of fire that they literally appeared to burn,—so that it was pain as well as pleasure to gaze upon those magnificent orbs. Her lips were thin, of a vivid scarlet, and revealing teeth which though somewhat large, were of the same polished whiteness and admirable evenness as those of the lady herself. Her features were small and regular: her hair was of jettiest blackness, without the slightest gloss—without natural wave or curl—and falling in long straight masses upon her shoulders and her back. Yet there was nothing ungraceful, much less ugly, in the effect produced by that straight hair. She was dressed in the usual white linen garb which properly belonged to her sex and position—or we might say, to her *caste*. But she had no covering upon her head beyond the natural one of her coal-black hair. Like her mistress, she wore no stay nor corset: nor needed she any. Upright as a dart, every movement, as she walked, was characterised by a willowy elasticity—with ease and lightness. Her arms and the lower part of her legs were bare: the former were circled with plain gold bracelets—the latter with anklets of the same material and fashion. Her feet were thrust into plain oriental slippers; and so light was her tread that those feet scarcely seemed to sink into the rich thickness of the carpet.

Entering the room with downcast eyes, and with an air of such profound respect as a slave might be expected to exhibit towards a queen—yet with that complete drawing-up of the loosely attired untrammelled form, which was habitual—she advanced towards her mistress, who spoke a few words; and the ayah, with a graceful inclination of the head, glided out of the room. In a few minutes she returned, carrying a massive silver salver, on which was an exquisitely cut glass containing some refreshing beverage, such as lemonade or sherbet. This she presented, with one knee bent down, to her mistress,—who drank the contents of the glass at a draught: for she was evidently parched with the effect of internal agitation. From the same cause she felt heated; and on another word being spoken, the Hindoo woman proffered the lady a fan made of the richly coloured plumage of oriental birds, and the handle of which was studded with gems.

"It is near ten o'clock, Sagoonah?" said the lady, inquiringly: "or does my watch err?"—but we should observe that her conversation with the ayah was in an eastern tongue.

"It is near ten o'clock, may it please your Highness," was the dependant's response.

"Hush! no Highness here!" said the Princess—for such indeed she was: then with a gracious smile she added, "But I forgot that we were speaking in our own native language. Tell me, Sagoonah—how like you this strange country?"

"I have seen so little of it," was the response given by the ayah—and this time she was cautious not to address her mistress in a manner becoming her rank,—"that it would perhaps be wrong to pronounce an opinion. But I like any country where it suits you to dwell; and so long as I remain with you, it is immaterial where."

"Yet you must have already formed an opinion," resumed the Princess, "relative to this country of the great English people. Tell me frankly—apart from any feeling of devotion towards myself,—to what conclusion is it that you have thus come?"

Sagoonah reflected for a few moments, and with downcast eyes: then suddenly raising those brilliant orbs, she said decisively, "Yes—I like England now."

At this moment a knock and ring were heard at the front door: the Princess started perceptibly, and made a hasty sign to Sagoonah,—who again glided from the apartment. The moment the door closed behind her, the Princess experienced a still stronger access of trouble than she had previously displayed: something like a shiver of anxiety and suspense passed over her; but the next instant her magnificent countenance brightened up with hope and joyous expectation. The door opened—and Mr. Redcliffe was ushered into that apartment.

The Princess made a movement as if she would have risen from the ottoman where she was seated, and would have flown towards him: but she repressed that evident inclination—she remained where she was—and with her head partially bent down, she surveyed the visitor with a look that was full of fondness as well as mournful deprecation, and which likewise seemed to implore pardon and mercy at his hands. And he, on his side, remained standing for nearly a minute close by the door,—his tall form enveloped in his ample cloak,—that form which was so upright, so well knit, and so commanding. His dark eyes were fixed half severely, half reproachfully upon the Princess: but it was evident that there was the influence of constraint upon both, and that neither knew how to begin addressing the other.

"At length we meet again," said the Princess, in a low tremulous voice. "You received my summons—and you have come."

"Summons!" echoed Mr. Redcliffe, for a moment drawing himself up haughtily. "Remember, Princess Indora, that you are not now in a country where you can coerce or command. If you behold me here, it is that I have come voluntarily, and in obedience to no power save that of my own will."

"You perhaps have a right to upbraid me," said Indora, in a voice that was tremulous and mournful: "but it would be generous if you were to abstain."

"I will do so," rejoined Redcliffe, speaking more gently, and even as if he regretted the sort of half rebuke which he had just now administered, —"because, if I experienced some evil at the hands of your Royal father and yourself, I likewise received some kindness."

The Princess Indora made a sign for him to sit down. He slowly put off his cloak, and placed himself upon the ottoman—but at such a distance from the lady, that she flung upon him a rapid glance of tender reproach.

We must observe that the conversation which we have just recorded had passed in the same language in which Indora had discoursed with Sagoonah, and that Redcliffe spoke it with proficient ease and fluency.

"Is it possible," he went on to ask, "that your Highness has come to England for the sole purpose described in the letter which I received at my new lodging this afternoon?"

"For what other purpose could I come?" asked the Princess. "Yes—it is true, Clement Redcliffe, that I have followed you to your own native land for the object described in my letter. I speak frankly. Love has made me bold before: it renders me not a coward now;—for I glory in that love which I feel for you. Do you require any additional proof than those words which I addressed to you—those offers which I made to you—and the whole tenour of my conduct towards you, when far away in my native land? You have that proof in the fact that I have undertaken and accomplished this long, long journey—that I have travelled under a feigned name, veiling my princely rank beneath a semblance of mediocrity and obscurity: I have come with but three faithful dependants—and I was resolved never to rest until I discovered you. Accident made me acquainted with the circumstance that you had been living at a particular hotel: this day I learnt that you had returned thither, but that you had removed elsewhere."

Redcliffe had listened with visible pain to this speech, which was delivered with an admixture of mournfulness and enthusiasm,—mournfulness at the coldness of his demeanour when they had met, and exultation at all that she had accomplished for the love that she bore him. And on his side, he was pained because his soul was naturally too generous not to compassionate the woman who had thus formed so extraordinary a passion for him—a passion which he however could not reciprocate; and he knew not in what terms to convey a decision which should dash to the ground all the hopes she had entertained.

"You do not speak to me," she went on to say,—"you are cold and distant. I half feared that it would be so: yet I endeavoured to persuade myself to the contrary. I reasoned that you could not fail to be touched by these last proofs of love which I have given you—and that a feeling of sympathy might possibly beget a softer and deeper sentiment."

"Indora," responded Redcliffe, in the mildest tones of his rich sonorous voice, "this is an infatuation which is truly incomprehensible. I have no vanity that can possibly be flattered," he added with some degree of bitterness; "and therefore I deceive not myself when I look in the mirror: nor would the adulation of the veriest sycophant—if I were a King, like your father, to-morrow—have power to deceive me. I know what I am—a man prematurely old—my hair turning gray—baldness coming—my complexion sallowed by illness and bronzed by the torrid sun of your native clime——"

"Speak not thus!" interrupted Indora, gazing upon Redcliffe with a look of genuine and ineffable tenderness. "Even if you be as you describe yourself, you are not so in my eyes. Were your hair white—were your face wrinkled—were your form bowed with age—I should still love you as fondly and as well! Yes—I should still behold you only as you were when first I saw you long years back, in my girlhood—and therefore should I love you! Nor is it only that the image of your personal beauty of that time is so indelibly impressed upon my heart: it is that the brilliancy of your intellect filled me with admiration—your manners charmed me—your knowledge enlightened me!"

She ceased for a moment; and then, with a sudden transition from one language to another, she went on to speak—but now in the English tongue, and with a fluency, an eloquence, a precision of accent, and a correctness of idiom that were truly remarkable.

"For all these reasons, Clement Redcliffe, do I love you! My happiness now depends upon the next word which must fall from your lips. Ponder well ere you speak that word, if it be to cause the wreck of a fellow-creature's happiness! Ah! there was another reason which made me love you; and if I forgot to mention it ere now, it notwithstanding is far from being the least! It is that you taught me the sublime doctrines of your own religion—that you weaned me from paganism and raised me up to be a Christian. You eradicated from my mind all the detestable prejudices with which it had been embued: you reclaimed me from a condition of mental darkness—you guided me into the paths of light. And think you that the gratitude wherewith you inspired me, was not certain to expand and deepen into love? Yes: and more—you taught me your own native language—that language in which I am now addressing you!"

"Princess," responded Redcliffe, now also speaking in the English language, "it cuts me to the very soul to hear all these things flow from your lips: for I am not naturally stern, cruel, and pitiless—and yet there is a word that *must* be spoken, but to which I tremble to give utterance!"

"No, no—breathe it not!" ejaculated Indora, with a sudden start and with dilating eyes: "breathe it not, I entreat you! it would be my death-blow! Think on all that I have done for your sake,—my native land abandoned—a strange and far-off clime willingly and gladly sought!—think of all this, I say—and give me some hope,

some encouragement, I beseech and implore you!"

"Indora," answered Redcliffe, now summoning all his fortitude to his aid, and endeavouring to crush the more generous feelings of his nature beneath the iron heel of his own strong will,—"it is for your own sake that I must speak promptly and decisively. I would not insult you—I would not wound you, by returning a written response to your own letter: I therefore resolved to come personally, though foreseeing that the interview would be a painful one. Now, arm yourself with all that courage which is naturally your own—call to your aid all that strength of mind with which Providence has endowed you. In loving me, you have fixed your affections on one who cannot love you in return:—would you have me, then, proclaim the contrary? It would be a falsehood!"

"If you love me not," answered Indora, sadly and softly,—"and you have often, too often told me this much before,—at least you may have compassion upon me. My own love might inspire you with sympathy; and sympathy is a tender feeling, akin to love itself!"

"Indora, the truth must indeed be spoken, stern though it may be—pitiless though it may appear. I cannot—I dare not marry you! And now, I beseech and implore that you will summon all Christian fortitude and resignation to your aid!"

The superb head of the Indian Princess drooped slowly down upon her bosom; and her arms, with the hands clasped, drooped likewise languidly over her magnificent dress. It seemed as if she had sunk into despair, and that all sense of the possibility of earthly happiness had left her. Redcliffe was evidently moved:—from the very bottom of his soul he pitied her; and whatsoever sense remained in his memory of that past evil sustained at her hands, and to which he had alluded—it all died away within him. He was too magnanimous at that moment to entertain any other feeling than one of profound compassion. He lingered: he thought that he was bound to say something more—something soul-strengthening if not hopefully cheering—something mentally fortifying, if not tenderly encouraging. But all in an instant smitten with the conviction that the scene ought to end as speedily as possible, he abruptly threw on his cloak; and exclaiming, "Farewell, Indora! may you be happy yet!" was hastening to leave the room.

"No!—one word ere we part!" cried the Princess, springing towards him: and her exquisitely shaped hand grasped his arm. "One word, Clement Redcliffe!—for we cannot separate thus."

"What would you say?" asked Redcliffe, with averted looks, and with visible impatience to take his departure.

"Only this!" she responded:—"that you will give yet one week's grave and serious reflection to that subject whereon you have ere now pronounced a decision. For one week let that decision be recalled. It is only a delay of seven poor days which I ask——"

"And which can effect no change, Princess, in my sentiments," added Redcliffe, mournfully but firmly.

"Interrupt me not!" ejaculated Indora, almost with vehemence: "but listen to what I have to say! One week's grace I demand at your hands. Pledge yourself that on the eighth evening hence you will return to me at the same hour, and that you will *then* pronounce your decision. Whatever it be, I will respect it."

"You promise to respect it?" exclaimed Redcliffe, now turning his eyes inquiringly upon Indora's countenance.

"I will respect it," she answered: and at the same moment her long taper fingers were withdrawn from the grasp which had tightened upon his arm—so that he was now free to depart, without violently disengaging himself from her hand.

"Then I will come!" he said: and the next instant the door of the room closed behind him.

He traversed the landing, which was filled with costly vases exhaling perfumes: he sped down the richly carpeted staircase: he reached the hall, where the ayah Sagoonah was waiting to afford him egress. He snatched up his hat from the hall-table; and as he turned towards the door, his looks suddenly encountered those of the Hindoo woman. For an instant he was struck with a strange unknown sensation—mysterious amazement blending with a sort of vague terror—as he caught the wondrous brilliancy of those regards which flashed upon him for an instant, and the next were withdrawn. He knew Sagoonah well—had known her indeed for years in her own native clime: but never did he recollect that she had looked at him in that way before.

He said not a word—but hastened forth from the house; and as he proceeded along the bye-road, there was a certain trouble in his mind while thinking of those burning looks which had been flung upon him like a spell, and which now appeared to haunt him. He quickened his pace, as if to outstrip the various painful and conflicting thoughts which were agitating in his brain: he reached the main road—he proceeded onward in the direction of the metropolis. He soon came within the sphere of brilliant gas-lamps: but brighter than all—and ominous too—was the impression left upon his soul by Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. SAMUEL EMANUEL.

In one of the principal streets of that perfect maze or network of thoroughfares, so narrow and so crowded, which constitute the City of London, stood the immense establishment of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier.

The reader will not require to be informed that this individual was of the Hebrew race: nor, if we be compelled to say anything to his disparagement, must it be presumed that we are holding him up as an invariable type of his nation. It is nothing of the sort. We yield to no one, we may without vanity affirm, in enlightened opinions with respect to the Jews; and we have the conviction that there are many excellent persons amongst them, as well as many admirable traits in their national character. But there are good and bad of all kinds and species in this world,—good and bad Christians—good and bad Mussulmans—good and bad Buddhists—and therefore

why not bad Israelites as well as good ones? We will even go farther—and we will affirm that within the range of our own experience, we have met persons professing Christianity of a viler stamp of rascality, and capable of more unmitigated scoundrelism, than ever we discovered a Jew to be guilty of.

Mr. Samuel Emanuel was the proprietor, as we have said, of an immense clothing mart. He had spent thousands and thousands of pounds in advertising it, and had puffed himself up into an amazing notoriety. Not a wooden hoarding about London that was not covered with his placards. If you took your seat in an omnibus, a shower of little books, neatly stitched, would suddenly rain in upon you: and on picking one up, you immediately recognised the superb frontage of Mr. Samuel Emanuel's establishment in the form of a wood-cut upon the cover. If you went for a walk in the fields in the environs of London, your eye would catch the name, calling, and address of Mr. Samuel Emanuel upon every fence and on every dead wall. If you looked in the advertising columns of newspapers, your eye would suddenly rest on a string of ill-measured lines, by courtesy called "poetry;" and if you had the curiosity or patience to read the wretched doggrel, you would thence evolve a series of the most extravagant puffs of Mr. Samuel Emanuel's establishment. There could be no doubt in your mind that while Mr. Samuel Emanuel considered the Sovereign to be the first personage in the realm, he entertained the pleasing conviction that he himself was the second. Talk of your first-rate authors—your eminent artists, or your great sculptors—talk of your renowned warriors by sea or by land—what was any one of these in comparison with the far-famed Mr. Samuel Emanuel?

And yet, if you walked into his establishment and beheld this great personage, you would find him to be as unprepossessing a fellow as you could possibly meet in a day's walk. Scarcely of the middle height—ill made and ungainly—he sought to set himself off by all the accessories of his own tailoring craft. No trouser-pattern in his own window would be more outrageous than the one selected for his pantaloons. He would wear a dress-coat, with rich velvet collar and lappels, as early as eight o'clock in the morning; and his waistcoat would be of the gaudiest silk pattern. As for his neckerchief, it would be sure to correspond in its flaunting vulgarity with the rest of his attire, and would be fastened in front with some inconceivably outrageous breast-pin—perhaps an enormous carbuncle clutched in a golden fist. Festooning over his gaudy waistcoat, there would be three or four watch-chains of different fashions and degrees of massiveness; and his dirty, stumpy, ill-shaped fingers, with very horrible nails, would be decorated with enough rings to fill a small tray, such as those whose contents purchasers are invited to inspect in jewellers' shops. As for his countenance, it had all the prominency of profile characteristic of his race,—but with an expression of mingled hardness and meanness, of low paltry cunning and avaricious greed—together with a faculty for the sudden assumption of a coarse vulgar insolence, that might readily be supposed to characterize such an individual.

His wife was a perfect giantess, with large coarse features—an enormously stout shape—and an air of brazen effrontery which she seldom took the trouble to subdue. There was a certain showiness about her—a sort of Flemish mare kind of handsomeness, which to some little extent was striking; and Mr. Emanuel considered her one of the finest specimens of the female sex. For this uxoriousness he was rather to be honoured than otherwise; and therefore we record it as no imputation to his detriment.

In respect to the establishment itself, we need only observe that it was splendidly fitted up—that the shop-windows were of the largest sized plate-glass—that the lamps were almost endlessly multiplied—and that as the show-rooms were crammed with goods, so the various shopmen were well nigh countless in each particular department. But truth compels us to add that the garments which Mr. Samuel Emanuel had for sale, were very much like himself—dashing and fine, but intrinsically mean and trumpery. Indeed, the cheapest of his articles would prove the dearest bargain that a purchaser could possibly possess himself of: they were very much after the same description as Peter Pindar's razors, which were made to sell, and not to cut: for Mr. Emanuel's garments were made for disposal, and not for wear.

To this establishment was it that, at about eleven in the forenoon of the day after the twins' removal to their new lodging, Christina bent her way, in company with her brother. He however remained outside while she entered: but just within the door she stopped short, under the influence of a sudden timidity which seized upon her. At the same moment she heard voices speaking: but those who were thus engaged in conversation, were concealed from her view, as she was hidden from their's, by an array of gaudy dressing-gowns for gentlemen, hung upon frames so contrived as to show off the particular fit and appearance of the several garments. Christina could not for the life of her move another step forward at the instant: she was overwhelmed with bashfulness—there was a sickening sensation at her heart—for she felt as if she were there under almost mendicant circumstances. It was no wonder that the delicate sensibilities of the young girl were thus poignantly touched by the new position to which Mr. Preston's flight had reduced her; and tears starting into her eyes, she was compelled to linger where she was in order to control and tranquillize her feelings. She thus unavoidably became a listener to some portion of the discourse which was going on behind the array of dressing-gowns.

"Well, Mr. Solomons," said a coarse masculine voice, speaking with the half patronizing, half stern accents of authority, "so far so good. But we must think of at least a hundred other means of keeping the Emporium incessantly before the public. Ah! by the bye, have you seen about some ragged boy or wretched-looking woman, to fling a stone at the pane which got accidentally cracked yesterday?"

"Yes, sir—it is all right," answered Mr. Solomons, who, we may as well at once inform our readers, was Mr. Emanuel's principal and confidential clerk. "I succeeded yesterday in getting hold of the most pitiable object that ever was seen in female shape; and she will be in the street presently to bang a large brick-bat right against the glass."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Mr. Samuel Emanuel, chuckling with a coarse laugh. "The pane, you see, my dear, was cracked; and therefore we should be obliged to have a new one—so that we really lose nothing by getting it smashed completely for us."

"Oh! I understand, you cunning rogue!" cried Mrs. Emanuel, in a great rough voice, as if it were a grenadier speaking. "But what will follow?—— though I can pretty well guess."

"Please, ma'am," said Mr. Solomons, "I have arranged it all. The woman agrees to break the pane; and of course she is equally agreeable to be given into custody. She will go before the Lord Mayor, and whine out a piteous tale about distress having compelled her to do it, that she might get herself sent to prison, as she has such a dreadful horror of the workhouse."

"And then, you know, my dear," resumed Mr. Emanuel, taking up the thread of the explanations, "as I shall have to attend at the Mansion House to charge the woman, I shall of course appear to be very much affected at her tale: I shall express my regret that I gave her in charge—and I shall beg his lordship to let her off with a reprimand. The Lord Mayor of course will look grave and pompous, and will deliver himself of the usual tirade—to the effect that persons can't be allowed to go smashing the windows of highly respectable tradesmen in the City of London; and he will send her to prison for seven days. So then I shall beg leave to hand to his lordship a couple of guineas for the poor woman's use when she comes out of gaol; and I shall tell her that if she can do needlework, she is to call upon me, when I will give her plenty of employment at good wages."

"To be sure, sir!—that is the way to do it," said the obsequious Mr. Solomons. "But, beg pardon, sir—if you *could* possibly manage to squeeze out a tear——"

"I'll shed a dozen," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel. "And then, don't you see, my dear," he continued, again addressing his wife, "we shall have such a long report in all to-morrow's papers—and so nicely drawn up! Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the celebrated clothier—pane of plate glass smashed—value thirty pounds—Mr. Emanuel deeply affected—behaved most handsomely—two guineas, and promise of work—hum of applause in the court, which the usher did not attempt to repress—Lord Mayor himself much affected—not an unmoistened eye in the whole place. There, my dear! what do you think of that? Famous advertisement—and costs us nothing but the two guineas to the woman, and the five shillings I ordered Solomons to give as earnest-money when he made the arrangement."

"I took care to give it to her, sir," observed that confidential personage: "and I have no doubt the poor afflicted creature," he added with a low ironical chuckle, "got amazingly drunk last night. But I have done more than this, sir: your orders about the boy who is to be run over by your advertising-van, are likewise carried out."

"Excellent!" again cried the harsh voice of Mr. Emanuel. "Tell us all about it, Mr. Solomons."

"Well, sir, I made an arrangement with the boy's father, and agreed on the price for which his son's leg is to be broken,—a guinea down on the nail—five guineas after it is done—and the doctor's bill to be paid. He's a nice lad, about fourteen—very sharp—and soon understood the advantage of being run over, sir, by your advertising-van."

"Of course," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel: "but the great advantage, though, will be reaped by us, I think. Another good puff, my dear, for the Emporium—and better than all the advertisements in the world. Let me see? Shocking accident—poor boy run over by one of the numerous advertising-vans of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the eminent clothier—Mr. Emanuel behaved in the handsomest manner—relieved the poor father's feelings to the utmost of his power—and has undertaken to provide for the boy for the rest of his life—noble trait, that, in the character of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier, outfitter for the colonies, army and navy tailor, &c. &c."

"Yes, sir—these are the best ways of keeping yourself properly before the public," said Mr. Solomons.

"But what letter is it that you have got in your hand there," inquired the clothier's wife, "and which you were reading just now?"

"Oh, it's nothing, ma'am!" replied Solomons. "Only a long rigmarole from that Mary Wright, you know——"

"Ah! the girl who worked so well, but who was in a consumption?" interjected Mrs. Emanuel. "And pray what does she want?"

"It's the old tale, ma'am," answered Solomons. "She declares she has worked herself to death in your service—she is now on her death-bed, without the necessaries of life—and begs and implores that you will——I think she says, *for the love of God*—send her a few shillings. She gives her address and courts inquiry into her case——Here it is! No.—, Redcross Street."

"Ah! capital tale, no doubt," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel, with flippant coarseness: "but not a single penny will she get from us. Take no notice of the letter, Solomons."

"That is just the course, sir, I intended to adopt. Ah! by the bye, sir, I had nearly forgotten to mention that several of the slop-workers threaten to strike for an advance of wages. The women say they can't go on making shirts at three-halfpence a piece, finding their own needles and thread."

"What impudence!" vociferated Mr. Emanuel; "let them strike and be hanged! There are plenty of others to take their place. Thank God, there are thousands and thousands of poor devils of that class ever ready to come forward and fill up gaps. Ah! it's a blessed country to live in, where the laws keep the labour-markets flooded with these pauperised wretches who are glad to work for any pittance. Deuce a bit! no rise in wages! Let them stick to their three-halfpence a shirt or go about their business. Ah! when I think of it—Solomons, write out a cheque for Malachi Lewis, for those six cases of champagne that came in yesterday."

"Yes, sir. There is one thing more that I have to mention. It's about Sarah Jones——"

"What! that pestering widow-woman," interjected Mrs. Emanuel, "who always will come to the place with her three children, because she says she has no one in whose charge she can leave

them: and though they are certainly kept tidy enough——"

"It's the same woman, ma'am," responded Solomons. "She came here just now to confess that she had pawned those two shooting-jackets she had to make up. She says that distress compelled her to do it, and that her landlady was going to turn her children and herself out into the streets at eleven o'clock at night when it was pouring with rain."

"And she has pawned my shooting-jackets!" vociferated Mr. Emanuel, in a towering rage. "Let her be given into custody at once, Solomons! And you must appear for me before the magistrate. Of course you will say that I feel it to be a duty which I owe to society—that I do it on public grounds alone—and all that sort of thing. And now go and see about it without delay."

This conversation occupied in the delivery far less time than we have taken to record it. Christina had triumphed over her own peculiar sensibilities so far as they regarded herself—but only to have them most keenly awakened in respect to others. She had remained riveted to the spot by the discourse which she thus overheard: its transitions from one subject to another, had been successively fraught with a strange and fearful interest for the generous-hearted girl. The wretched woman whose misery and unscrupulousness were alike taken advantage of to procure the breaking of an already broken window, in order that the clothier might be paraded before the public—that poor boy whose very father had bargained in cold blood for him to sustain a serious injury—the dying girl who in working for the Emanuels, had worked her own winding-sheet, and now vainly implored a pittance of relief—the unfortunate female slop-workers who were ground down to the very lowest infinitesimal fraction of wage, and who were to be remorselessly deprived of employment because they asked for a recompense at least a trifle above starvation-point—and last of all, the hapless widow-woman who was to be given into custody and torn from the children, whom she evidently loved, for an offence to which real penury had driven her, but for which the clothier experienced no sympathy because the case presented not any features which he could turn into an available mode of puffery for himself and his Emporium,—all these cases, coming thickly one upon the other, had filled the heart of Christina with mingled horror, astonishment, pity, and disgust. Therefore, even when her own peculiar feelings were overruled, she was kept riveted to the spot, a most painfully interested listener to a discourse which revealed the wrongs and sufferings of others.

She now stepped forward, and was immediately confronted by Mr. and Mrs. Emanuel, who were turning away from the spot where they had been discoursing with their managing man. Though Christina was neatly dressed, and had not the slightest appearance of poverty about her,—yet the clothier and his wife were so accustomed to receive applications for work from respectable young women in reduced circumstances, that they at once anticipated the object of her visit. The next moment, however, they thought they must be wrong: for a second glance at Christina's countenance showed that there was a flush of indignation upon it, mingled with as much abhorrence as it was in her delicate nature to display. They therefore awaited until she should explain her own business.

"I should be obliged to you," she said, "if you will give me the address of that poor widow-woman of whom you have spoken; and I will at once hasten and furnish her with the means to set herself right towards you—so that you need not give her into custody."

The Jew and Jewess exchanged looks of rapid meaning with each other; and then the former, with an insolent air, exclaimed, "I suppose, young Miss, you have been listening to what passed?"

"And pray," demanded Mrs. Emanuel, "what business have you to come sneaking into a place to play the eavesdropper?"

Christina's countenance became crimson: the flush of indignation previously upon it, suddenly deepened into one of shame, as she was struck by her own imprudence in thus confessing that she had listened: but the avowal was inadvertently made in the strong excitement of feelings under which she was labouring at the moment.

"I will tell you frankly," she said, speedily recovering her presence of mind, "that I called for a specific purpose—and it was scarcely my fault that I overheard any portion of your discourse."

"And that specific purpose?" exclaimed Mr. Emanuel, bending his looks with insolent menace upon the young girl.

"I came to ask for work," she responded, her eyes sinking beneath the coarse regards of the clothier.

"Work indeed!" he ejaculated, with a sneering air and contemptuous chuckle: then leaning forward towards her, he added with brutal insolence, "You sha'n't have any work from my establishment. I don't encourage sneaking, prying listeners."

"Work indeed!" shouted Mrs. Emanuel, in her great masculine voice: and putting her hands upon her hips, she said, "A pretty creature you are, to come gliding like a cat into a respectable house, just for all the world as if you meant to steal something. Who knows but that you have whipped up an article and have got it under your shawl?"

Christina's eyes for a moment threw a glance of indignant innocence at the coarse Jewess: but the next moment she burst into tears, and staggered back as if about to faint.

"Come—be off with you!" said Mr. Emanuel in the most brutal tone. "You are after no good here; and if you don't make yourself scarce, I shall precious soon send for a policeman."

Terrified by this threat, which she felt the cowardly ruffian was but too capable of carrying out, Miss Ashton issued forth from the shop; and on emerging into the street, was instantaneously joined by her brother. Perceiving that she was in tears, and that she was much agitated, he naturally ascribed her emotions to disappointment in respect to that hope of obtaining work with which they had been flattering themselves: but when he came to learn everything that had passed, his indignation knew no bounds—his naturally fine spirit flamed up in a moment—and Christina experienced some difficulty in preventing him from going back to the Emporium, to overwhelm the

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Jew and Jewess with reproaches for their brutal conduct towards his sister.

"It is useless, my dear Christian," she said, retaining him forcibly by the arm as they proceeded along the crowded street: "you would only get yourself into some embarrassment. I implore you to tranquillize your feelings! Alas, I begin to comprehend that the power of money is immense and irresistible in this country. It constitutes colossal strength—while poverty is in itself abject weakness. Christian," said the young girl, after a pause, "is there nothing which suggests itself to your mind?"

"Yes, dear Christina," he at once responded, as if the very look which his beautiful twin-sister had bent upon him, transfused in an instant to his mind what was passing in her own. "We must go and relieve the dire necessities of that poor perishing creature. It is fortunate that you heard her address mentioned. Would that we also knew where to find the poor widow, that we might succour her likewise! Alas, our own resources are now limited enough: but still—but still," added Christian, with a world of sincere feeling in his looks and his accents, "we must spare something for the assistance of our fellow-creatures."

The twins were suddenly cheered by the prospect of doing good, as well as by having the means to accomplish it, small though their succour might be. They inquired their way to Redeross Street; and finding the house which Christina had heard mentioned at the Emporium, they ascertained from an old, harsh-featured, sordid-looking woman, who announced herself as the landlady, that there was a young person of the name of Mary Wright lodging at the place, but that as she could not pay her rent, and was dying, the workhouse authorities had been applied to that very day.

"Let me see her," said Christina: while Christian hastily whispered to his sister that he would await her in the street.

The landlady—thinking by the appearance of the twins that they came for a charitable purpose, and that the arrears of rent due to her would probably be paid—suddenly grew mighty civil; and she conducted Christina up a dark and dirty staircase to the very top of the house. Opening an attic door, she gave the young girl to understand that this was Mary Wright's room.

Christina entered. The attic was of the smallest size, and its appearance of the meanest poverty. Stretched upon a wretched flock mattress, which lay upon the boards in one corner—and covered with the scantiest bed-clothing, lay a young woman whose years could scarcely yet have numbered one-and-twenty—in the very last stage of consumption. She was pale as a corpse, save and except with regard to a vivid hectic spot which seemed to burn upon either cheek. She was thin—Oh! so thin—it was complete emaciation!—so that it appeared as if merely to raise that wasted, attenuated form, would be to inflict excruciating pain, as the very bones might threaten to penetrate through the skin—for flesh upon them there was none. The attic was almost completely denuded of every necessary, and possessed not a single comfort. The dying creature was alone when Christina entered,—no relative, no nurse, no friendly female to attend upon her! Notwithstanding her frightfully emaciation—notwithstanding the ravages which disease had worked upon her countenance—there were nevertheless sufficient traces of past beauty to indicate that she must have at one time possessed no ordinary degree of loveliness.

Christina gave her to understand that accident had made her acquainted with her condition—and that though her own means were limited (the generous girl said not *how* limited) she had come to proffer what little assistance she was enabled to afford. Mary Wright was for some time so suffocated by her emotions that she could not give utterance to a word—and the tears streamed from her eyes. At length she succeeded in expressing her deep gratitude, in a weak dying voice and in broken accents,—declaring that she had never expected to behold a friendly countenance gaze upon her again in this life.

Christina learnt from her that about thirty shillings were owing to the landlady; and though the dying young woman proffered not the request in words, yet her plaintively appealing looks seemed to implore our heroine to save her from the threatened removal to the workhouse. This pledge Christina at once gave; and promising likewise to return in a few minutes, she hastened from the room.

The landlady was waiting upon the stairs, watching for Miss Ashton, in order to see what might turn up to her own advantage;—and Christina at once liquidated from her slender purse the arrears of rent that were due. Then she continued her way down stairs, and rejoined her brother in the street.

Christian had been waiting for her about a quarter of an hour; and during this interval a little incident had occurred which he had noticed, and which he presently mentioned to Christina. While walking to and fro in the street, he had beheld a posse of ragged-looking creatures emerge from a narrow dirty court. These individuals consisted of a man dressed like a dilapidated journeyman-carpenter, with a paper cap on his head—a woman having the appearance of the wife of an impoverished artizan—and a whole tribe of children whose rags and tatters scarcely covered their nakedness. At the first apparition of this wretched-looking party, Christian's hand was thrust into his pocket to clutch the first coin which his fingers might happen to encounter, in order to transfer it to the poor family—when something which occurred at the moment, made him drop the coin again in a sort of stupified amazement.

"Now, Bet," said the man, "mind you look like an honest woman for once in your life—and turn that gin-drinking air of your's into a precious dolefulness. And you brats, you!—if you don't put on as much misery as possible, I sha'n't get enough to pay your parents for the hiring of you. Mind, Bet, the dodge is that we walked all the way from Liverpool and can't get no work whatsomever."

These were the words which had produced a sudden revulsion of feeling on the part of Christian, and had so suddenly made him drop the coin again to the bottom of his pocket. He at once saw that it was a gang of unprincipled impostors whom he had been about to relieve. They did not immediately catch sight of him, when they were issuing from the court—nor did they suspect

that he overheard the injunctions given by the man: for no sooner was he perceived by them, than he was surrounded by the ragged horde of children, imploring alms in a whining tone, while their dirty little paws were stretched out towards him. At the same instant the man began to snivel forth a miserable tale, of how he was a carpenter out of work—how he and his dear wife and eight children, four of whom were small ones, had tramped all the way from Liverpool, never once sleeping in a bed and enduring every possible privation. Then the woman took up the strain, in a canting, whining, lugubrious tone, telling Christian how she had been brought up by kind parents—how she had been a good wife and a fond mother—how she had borne her husband thirteen children, of which five lay under the turf—and then she stopped short and appeared to cry bitterly. Christian had found himself so completely hemmed in by the posse of impostors, that he had some difficulty in getting from their midst; and in his indignation at being thus regarded as an object on whom to practise their deception, he let drop a few words to make them aware of what he had caught from the man's own lips. Then the posse—from the man himself down to the youngest child—levelled at him the coarsest, filthiest abuse: and as he retreated in one direction, they took another, bending their way into a neighbouring street.

Such was the narrative which Christian gave Christina, when the latter had described to him the spectacle that had met her own eyes in the wretched attic she had been visiting. They proceeded to the nearest pastry-cook's, where they purchased some jelly: they bought some articles at a grocer's—and they ordered bread from a baker's. Then they returned into Redcross Street; and while Christian again waited for his sister, the latter ascended to Mary Wright's chamber. She now learnt a piteous tale from the poor dying creature's lips,—a tale of an early orphanage and of total friendlessness—of dependence upon her own resources—of bitter poverty resignedly endured, and in defiance of all the temptations which her beauty had brought in her way—of the insidious advance of consumption—and of poignant miseries and privations suffered when she was no longer enabled to work.

"Yesterday," said the poor creature in conclusion, "I exerted sufficient energy to write to those who had employed me, imploring assistance. It was in the direst despair that I thus addressed them, and with no real hope in my heart: for, alas! I know full well the hardness of their own hearts. They have not been moved towards me: but heaven has sent me a ministering angel in the form of yourself."

Christina did not choose to sadden the poor dying creature more deeply than she was already afflicted, by explaining that it had come to her knowledge that her appeal to the Emanuels was treated with brutal heartlessness. She remained upwards of an hour with Mary Wright,—doing all she could to conduce to her comfort, and forcing her to partake of the food which was purchased for her use. She promised to return on the following day, and received the warmest, most heartfelt expressions of gratitude from the sufferer's lips. Ere quitting the house, she sought another interview with the landlady; and putting some money into her hand, bade her show all possible attentions to the dying woman,—at the same time giving her the assurance that she should be rewarded in proportion as she obeyed these injunctions.

Christian was not wearied of waiting upwards of an hour for his sister's re-appearance: he knew that she was engaged in a self-imposed task of true benevolence—and he would have cheerfully tarried ten times as long if it were necessary. Scarcely had Christina issued forth from the house, and just as she was taking her brother's arm, they both beheld a gentleman stop short and gaze upon them with an air of interest. He had evidently recognised them, and they too recognised him—for he was none other than Mr. Redcliffe. He at once perceived that there was sadness in Christina's looks, and that tears hung upon her long dark lashes—the traces of that deep sorrow which she had experienced at the mournful narrative of Mary Wright.

"Wherefore are you thus depressed?" he inquired, somewhat abruptly, but with a courteous bow of recognition, as he glanced from one to the other.

"Because I have just left a scene which would move the hardest of hearts," replied Christina. "A young woman, crushed down by overwhelming toil—in the last stage of consumption——"

"And it is a deserving case?" asked Mr. Redcliffe, interrupting the young girl, while he still continued to contemplate both herself and her brother with a deep and mournful interest.

"Oh! yes, sir—it is a deserving case—there can be no doubt of it!" exclaimed Christina, the tears gushing afresh from her eyes, as all she had seen and all she had heard sprang vividly up to her memory.

"Then it shall be inquired into," answered Redcliffe: and with another courteous bow, he passed abruptly on his way.

The twins proceeded slowly along the street, and presently they looked back to see if Mr. Redcliffe had turned to call at the house: but he was just disappearing round the corner of another street, and the orphans knew not what to think—whether he had only said the case should be inquired into in order to cut short a tale which he cared not to hear—or whether the promise would be really fulfilled. As they continued their own way, Christina told her brother all that she had learnt from Mary Wright; and it was with a profound sympathy that the youth listened to his sister's narrative.

They had threaded several streets in their progress towards a point at which they purposed to take an omnibus,—when Christian suddenly pressed his sister's arm; and as she looked in the same direction on which his regards were fixed, she at once comprehended his meaning. There was the posse of ragged impostors, singing at the very top of their voices. The man had his hands thrust into the pockets of his dilapidated trousers; and his face was screwed up to as piteous an air of misery as could be well conceived. The woman, with mouth wide open, was gazing up into the air,—dragging along a ragged urchin by each hand. A girl clung to the coat-tails of the man, who passed as her father;—and to her dress a little half-naked boy, scarcely five years of age,

was holding on. On the right of the front rank, an impudent-looking minx of a girl, with an old cotton handkerchief about her head, was staring up at a window and proffering a box of matches. In the rear an older girl and a boy—both with villanously hang-dog countenances—were likewise doing their best to excite compassion. It needed but a partially scrutinizing glance to perceive that this tribe of children could, with scarcely any degree of possibility, belong to those who were passing themselves off as their parents: for not between any two of them was there the slightest family similitude.

There they were, slowly making their way along the street,—singing at the top of their discordant voices; and when the song temporarily ceased, the man whined forth the same tale he had already told to Christian—with this trifling difference however, that he happened to substitute Portsmouth for Liverpool as the place whence he and his family had tramped up. Halfpence from the windows rattled down into the street: these were quickly snatched up by the children, who scudded about in all directions for the purpose: the man prayed "that the Lord might bless the kind ladies and gentlemen who thus assisted a poor mechanic out of employ"—the woman dropped divers low curtseys—and then the singing recommenced. It did not seem to strike the charitable donors as being at all strange that the poor family, though a few minutes before they had proclaimed themselves to be starving, did not at once rush off to the nearest baker's and buy some bread. No such thing!—they went on singing away in most frightful discord—until the sudden appearance of a policeman, who was advancing in a manner which plainly showed that he knew the arch-impostors full well, spread dismay in their ranks.

The singing ceased in a moment: and the man hurriedly said, "Come along, Bet—or that blue-bottle will precious soon blow the gaff!"—and they made a rush towards the next street, dragging the youngest children hastily along with them.

Such was the spectacle which the twins beheld; and it certainly afforded no encouraging picture of London life. It shocked the pure minds of that youthful pair to think that such impostures should be practised under the guise of honest poverty: for they knew that the consciousness that these things were done, must often and often prevent the really charitably disposed from dispensing the alms which they would otherwise bestow, and that therefore the really deserving suffered for the rascality of practised deceivers.

Early in the forenoon of the following day, Christian and Christina were again in Redcross Street, at the door of the house to which their benevolent purpose brought them. The landlady made her appearance; and the tale which she told, was as gratifying to the twins as it was almost completely unexpected. It appeared that a tall gentleman, with a dark complexion, and wearing a cloak, had called at the house in company with a medical practitioner from the neighbourhood, about two hours after Christina left on the preceding day. The medical attendant ascended to see the invalid, while the gentleman remained below to question the landlady. What followed, had evidently been pre-arranged, and was speedily accomplished. A hackney-coach was fetched—the dying young woman was placed in it—and was borne away to another house, somewhere in the suburbs of Islington. The landlady mentioned the address, and concluded by observing that the tall dark gentleman did not accompany Mary Wright to her new abode, but sent the surgeon with her, placing in his hands a handful of money ere he hurried away.

The twins had no difficulty in recognising Mr. Redcliffe in the tall dark gentleman; and they experienced the utmost delight at all the intelligence which they thus received. They repaired at once to the address named; and on arriving at the house, in an open, airy, and healthy part of Islington, they found that lodgings of the most cheerful and comfortable description had been taken for the poor sufferer—that a nurse had been provided for her—that ample funds had been placed for her benefit in the hands of the landlady, who was a kind, benevolent woman—and that poor Mary Wright herself had received Mr. Redcliffe's assurance, delivered through the medium of the worthy surgeon, that she need have no farther care in respect to her maintenance, as she would be well provided for. Mary Wright had also learnt that it was through Christina she had thus become the object of such noble charity; and we may add that she had not forgotten to inform the medical man of the kindness received from a beautiful young creature with dark hair and eyes, but whose name she had not learnt.

CHAPTER XVI.

INDORA.

It was the eighth evening after that interview between Mr. Redcliffe and the Princess Indora which has been described in a recent chapter; and we must revisit the secluded abode of that oriental lady. On this occasion we shall find her in the drawing-room, which was furnished with a mingled sumptuousness and elegance corresponding with that species of boudoir where we first beheld her. The draperies were of the costliest description: the sofas and ottomans were covered with a dark green velvet, of so rich a texture and with such a gloss, that it appeared almost a sin for a human form to press upon it. There were chairs in this room, made of some precious wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and having luxurious cushions of the same material as that which covered the ottomans. The ornaments upon the mantel-piece, the nick-nacks upon the tables, the vases filled with flowers, or whence perfumes exhaled their fragrance, were all of the costliest and most curious eastern description. A mellowed lustre, but quite sufficient to flood the apartment, was thrown out by superb chandeliers: a fire burnt cheerfully in the grate—and its blaze was shrouded from the eye by screens curiously painted, and the framework of which was elaborately as well as delicately carved. Fans, formed of the feathers of tropical birds, lay within the reach, wheresoever the Princess might choose at the moment to seat herself; and a large cage, standing on a table near the window, contained within the sphere of its golden wires a dozen or so of birds of the

most diminutive size, but in every variety of beautiful plumage.

The Princess Indora was reclining upon a sofa at about the same hour on which, eight days previously, we first introduced her to the reader. She was apparelled in a similarly fanciful style—only that she wore another dress; but the colours of the separate garments were chosen with a most tasteful regard to the delicate duskiness of the complexion, and the nature of the charms they had to set off. Supremely beautiful—eminently handsome indeed—was the Princess Indora, as she reposed, in her oriental garb, upon the velvet sofa in that sumptuously furnished room. And as before too, there were intervals when she was deeply pensive—other intervals when she experienced a nervous excitement: for, as the reader is aware, it was on this evening that she was to receive the final decision of the object of her love.

Presently the door opened; and Sagoonah made her appearance. She entered, bearing the massive silver salver on which was the cut glass containing sherbet, and which she presented on bended knee to the Princess. The Hindoo woman was clad in the same style as that which we have before described, and which was so admirably calculated to set off the lithe bayadere symmetry of her shape, and to leave her form and limbs completely free for every movement and gesture.

"Within the hour that is passing, my faithful Sagoonah," said the Princess, when she had quaffed a portion of the sherbet, "my fate will be sealed. The alternatives between which I am balancing, are happiness and misery. Both are in extremes—and there is no medium in which I may take refuge. You, Sagoonah, who have been my confidante—you who have served me so faithfully—you who shrank not from accompanying me on my long, long journey to a strange clime,—you, I say, must feel some anxiety as to the result of this evening's interview?"

"I do, lady," responded Sagoonah; and as she stood somewhat aside, her eyes suddenly flashed strange fires.

"You know, Sagoonah," continued the Princess, "how fondly—how devotedly I have for years loved that man! You know how god-like was his beauty when first he became my father's prisoner——"

"I know it, Princess," responded Sagoonah. "I was then a girl of about ten years of age."

"And I was fifteen," observed the Princess, in a low musing tone. "Yes—fifteen years have elapsed since the first day that I beheld Clement Redcliffe! He was the first Englishman that I had ever seen——"

"The first too, your Highness, that I ever saw;" interjected Sagoonah: and though her words were uttered with that profound respect which had become habitual to her, it was nevertheless with a slight air of abstraction that she thus spoke.

"Fifteen years—the most precious ones of my life," continued Indora, "have been passed in a love that has been all but hopeless. No—not hopeless—for if so, I could not have existed: but it is at least a love that has experienced no reciprocity. Yes—handsome as some being of a higher world, was that Englishman when first we met! He tells me that he is changed now—and that the marks of age are coming thickly and rapidly upon him. If so, I behold them not—or scarcely. What to me is it if his form should change, when his mind still shines with the never dimning, imperishable light of one of these gems?"—and her looks settled upon a bracelet studded with diamonds of the largest size and of the most dazzling brilliancy. "Methought," continued the Princess, "that so long as he was a prisoner in my father's capital, his proud soul would disdain to bend itself towards her who was the daughter of him who held him captive. Aye—and more than that—he learnt by some means, I know not how, that when my father would have given him his liberty, it was in compliance with *my* secret promptings that he still retained him a prisoner. Yes—I *did* so prompt my father: for much as I loved Clement Redcliffe—deeply, deeply as I took his welfare to heart—I could not possibly bring myself to say the word which should make him free, and thus incur the risk of losing him for ever. He escaped—you are aware how: you know too how wild was my anguish—how bitter my grief, when I received the tidings of his flight. But then I thought to myself that perhaps now that he was free, he might no longer look upon me as one who was wronging him: he might forget the past—or at least pardon it, on account of all the love I bore him. I flattered myself too, that this love so deep, so devoted, so imperishable, could scarcely fail to beget a kindred feeling. The eagle requires ample space for the play of his huge wings and the soaring of his ambitious flight: and so I thought that the proud soul of Clement Redcliffe, when enjoying the freedom of the whole world's range, might look upon me with a different regard from that with which it was wont to survey me in the narrow circuit of my father's capital. Sagoonah, think you that this hope will be disappointed?"

"Princess," responded the Hindoo dependant, "I am but little accustomed to read the human heart: and the heart of an Englishman appears to me as inscrutable as the mysteries of some forbidden book."

"True!—you cannot judge it," observed the Princess, in a low musing tone. "And moreover, you have never loved, Sagoonah. No—you have never loved: you know not what love is. You have been attached to me from your childhood; and if you had experienced the slightest scintillation of that passion which I feel, you would have told me—or I should have discovered it. Is it not so, Sagoonah?"—and the Princess raised her large lustrous eyes, dark as those of the gazelle, towards the countenance of her dependant.

"It is so, lady," responded Sagoonah, in a low but firm voice.

"I marvel that you never loved," proceeded Indora, still in that same musing manner as before. "It appears to me that a heart susceptible of love must be invariably associated with beauty of the person:—it seems as if beauty, being formed to create love, ought to prove susceptible of the fire which it kindles. And you, my faithful Sagoonah, possess charms superior to any of your sex or *caste*, in your own native land. Yes, you are handsome—very handsome!"—and now the eyes of the Princess wandered slowly, and with a certain degree of listless abstraction, over the bayadere-like form of her attendant.

Sagoonah stood perfectly motionless—her figure

upright as a dart—her head somewhat inclined forward, like a flower upon its stalk: and yet in that uprightness there was neither ungraceful stiffness nor inelegant rigidity. She seemed to feel that, as a slave, she was bound to submit with all becoming respect to that survey on the part of her mistress. Had an observer been present, he could not have avoided thinking to himself that they were two of the most splendid specimens of oriental beauty, of distinct shades of complexion.

"And have you never thought to yourself, Sagoonah," asked the Princess Indora, "that you would like to know what love is?—have you never felt a craving to experience that sentiment which plays the chiefest part in all the affairs of this life? Has there been no curiosity in your soul to learn the joy, the delight, the happiness of love?"

The Hindoo woman's cheeks glowed as if with the purple flush of wine,—the rich red blood mantling through the transparency of her dusky skin: but the ruddy hue passed away as quickly as it rose up; and when the Princess again slowly turned her eyes upon the countenance of Sagoonah, it had its wonted look and expression again.

"Yes—within the hour that is passing," said Indora, suddenly reverting to that topic which was most vitally interesting to herself, and without observing that her dependant had not answered the questions which she had put to her,—"my fate must be sealed!"

"And if the Englishman's decision be against your happiness, dear mistress of mine," said Sagoonah, now sinking on one knee and looking with affectionate earnestness up into Indora's countenance, "what will your Highness do?"

"Ah! what will I do?" she murmured, as an expression of anguish at the bare thought, flitted over her superb features. "What will I do, Sagoonah?"—then after a pause, during which she seemed to reflect profoundly, she added in accents of mingled mournfulness and despair, "Heaven only knows what I shall do!"

"But yet, dear lady, you have every hope—have you not?" inquired Sagoonah, as she still knelt by the velvet-covered ottoman, and still gazed earnestly up into the countenance of Indora. "Do you not imagine, beloved Princess, that the sense of obligation is greater than that of wrong in the mind of the Englishman? If your Royal father kept him captive for so many, many years, he at least treated him with all becoming hospitality: he lodged him in his own palace—he gave him slaves to minister unto him—a guard of honour to attend upon him—and riches to dispose of as he thought fit."

"Aye—but you understand not the proud soul of an Englishman!" replied the Princess Indora: "you comprehend not that however brilliant the circumstances of his captivity, it is captivity all the same! The chains may be of gold—but they are still chains which he burns to throw off. Like the bird in his gilded cage, he is dazzled not by the sumptuousness of his dwelling—but pants for the fresh air of freedom: and so it was with Clement Redcliffe. He knew that the slaves were spies upon his actions—that the guards, though ostensibly appointed to do him honour, were naught else than gaolers and custodians—and that the riches heaped upon him, were mere toys to render his captivity somewhat the less intolerable."

"And yet the Englishman bore himself courteously and well towards your Royal father and your Highness's self," observed Sagoonah.

"It was with a cold courtesy," responded Indora; "and all that Clement Redcliffe did, was doubtless for the purpose of conciliating my sire in the hope of obtaining his freedom all the more quickly. Besides, the natural pride of a civilized Englishman could not help feeling flattered by being placed in a position to smooth down the asperities of our own semi-barbarism. Clement Redcliffe inculcated the arts of peace, and by his counsel enabled my father to amend those laws that were bad, and to promulgate new ones that were good, so as to forward the interests and promote the happiness of the people of Inderabad. But not one single suggestion in the art of war did Clement Redcliffe ever proffer: nor would he afford the slightest insight into the discipline of those English troops who have rendered themselves so formidable in our native clime. Do you comprehend wherefore he maintained so inexorable a reserve upon those points?"

"Doubtless, lady," answered Sagoonah, "he thought that the time might come when the English invaders would push their conquests to your Royal parent's far-off kingdom, and therefore he would not put a weapon, even the smallest and the bluntest, in the hands of your august father's troops—for fear lest it should be used sooner or later against the armies of his own fellow-countrymen."

"Yes—these were his motives," rejoined the Princess; "and they rendered him all the more admirable—all the more noble, in my estimation. But I was ere now explaining how it was that Clement Redcliffe, while enduring his captivity, took a pride in propagating the arts of peace amongst us. Yet month after month and year after year did he demand his freedom; and at length my father would have given it——but I, alas——"

The Princess stopped short; and Sagoonah, slowly rising from her kneeling position, retreated to a respectful distance, where she stood in her wonted attitude—her bayadere form upright, and her face inclining towards the splendidly modelled bust which the arrangements of her linen dress left more than half revealed.

"'Twas strange," proceeded Indora, after a brief pause, and again speaking in a musing manner, "that my interference should have come to Clement Redcliffe's knowledge: for my father would scarcely have spoken of it. Doubtless it was a surmise, though a correct one, on Redcliffe's part: but how bitter were the reproaches which he levelled against me at the time! Ah, that was a scene of fearful excitement which I can never forget!"

"Your Highness has suffered much for your love's sake," observed Sagoonah gently.

"Love is a rose with thorns," answered Indora, in a mournful voice: "and perhaps, my faithful Sagoonah, it is fortunate for you that you have never experienced that sentiment. To me it has proved a source of illimitable happiness and of almost overwhelming affliction—the soul alter-

nating between a paradise of bliss and Satan's kingdom. No, Sagoonah—seek not to learn what love is!—avoid it if you have the power! Happier—far happier are you than your unfortunate mistress!"

"Is hope, then, at this instant dead within the bosom of your Highness?" inquired the Hindoo dependant.

"Oh, how can I explain the exact nature of my own feelings?" cried Indora, almost petulantly. "When the ocean is agitated into mighty waves, the bark which is floating over it, rises at one moment to the summit of a billow, and is the next plunged down into the abyss. So it is with my heart—now at one instant elevated by hope, at another plunged into despair. For the vessel, when thus storm-tossed, beholds from the summit of the billows the beacon-light shining afar off and marking the entrance of the refuge-harbour: but when borne down into the deep, deep trough of the sea, the mariner on board his vessel beholds naught save the dark gloomy menacing waters around him. And so, again, is it with my heart. Now, Sagoonah, you comprehend all the mingled pleasures and pains—the ecstatic hopes and the intervals of blank despair—the thrilling joy and the deep despondency—the fervid expectations and the wildering apprehensions, which make up the sum of love. Seek not to know it, my faithful Sagoonah!—seek not to know it! It is your fond mistress who counsels you thus."

Having thus spoken, Indora made a hasty and somewhat impatient sign; and Sagoonah glided forth from the sumptuously furnished apartment.

Scarcely had the Hindoo woman reached the foot of the staircase, when a knock and ring called her to the front door; and on opening it, Mr. Redcliffe stepped across the threshold. He was, as usual, enveloped in his ample cloak; and his hat was drawn over his countenance—not as if, while coming hither, he had more than at any other time studied to avoid observation; but such appeared to be his invariable habit when moving about the streets of the mighty metropolis. As he placed his hat upon the hall-table, and put off his cloak, he flung a look upon Sagoonah: for the impression of her haunting eyes was still strong upon his mind—and he doubtless now regarded her to see whether she again looked at him in that same strange fashion which had sent a vague and unknown trouble into the depths of his soul. But it was not so. The Hindoo woman, having closed the front door, stood in readiness to conduct Mr. Redcliffe into the presence of her mistress: her demeanour was that of an oriental slave—her looks cast down, and the brilliant lustre of her eyes veiled by the thick jetty fringes which formed such dark lines, so that the very duskiness of her complexion appeared pale and light in comparison therewith.

Another minute, and Mr. Redcliffe again stood before the Indian Princess.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DECISION.

It would be impossible to describe the feelings with which Indora became aware that this man who was the arbiter of her destiny, was now once more in her presence. She rose to a sitting posture on the velvet-covered sofa: but she dared not throw a single glance towards him. Hope and despair were strangely agitating in her heart—blending too, although in confliction,—paradoxical as the expression may seem. It was natural that she should seek to prolong this hope as much as possible—and that, on the other hand, she should not rush forward as it were to find herself face to face with despair, until imperiously compelled to envisage it. The colour went and came in rapid transitions upon her cheeks,—blushing and disappearing through the transparency of her delicately dusky skin: while her bosom rose and sank with quick heavings.

"My promise is kept," said Clement Redcliffe, speaking in his wonted accents of mournfulness, but in all the harmony of his rich manly voice; "and your Highness will now probably explain wherefore you demanded this interval of eight days' delay?"

Indora motioned Redcliffe to take a seat by her side; and now her eyes were turned slowly upon him. Hope and fear trembled in that glance: love and apprehension vibrated in that look. She dreaded what his decision might be—and yet she sought to put away from her own mind the contemplation of the very worst. The Englishman placed himself on the ottoman at a distance which was properly respectful towards a lady of her princely rank—but which was little calculated to encourage the hope that her loving heart sustained in conflict with the strength of despair.

"Yes, I will explain myself," said Indora, with a sudden sensation of delight that she was thus furnished by his very words with an opportunity of again appealing to the tenderest feelings of his nature. "I besought this brief delay in the conviction that during the interval, you would not fail to ponder well and profoundly upon the decision towards the proclamation of which each passing day brought you nearer and nearer. Then I thought to myself that every proof of my devoted love—every evidence of my imperishable affection, would present itself to your memory, and that the whole, accumulating with force and power, would rule your mind in my favour. I thought to myself that you would recollect how the mightiest Princes of my own native clime sought my hand in marriage, but that I rejected every proposal for *your* sake. I thought too, that you would bear in mind how by those refusals I drew down upon myself my father's anger——"

"Your Highness had little to fear from the King's indignation," interrupted Redcliffe: "for your influence over him was complete."

"The allusion is ungenerous," observed Indora softly, and half reproachfully. "It is meant to remind me that I stood as a barrier in the way of your freedom, and that I over-ruled my father's favourable inclinations, when towards the end of your captivity he was about to yield to your often-repeated prayer to be liberated from it. Yes: it was a crime—a dark branding crime which I thus affixed upon myself——But, Oh! I felt that it was death to part from you; and I had not the courage—deeply, devotedly as I loved you—to lay such suicidal hands upon myself!"

"Oh! if you had given me my liberty," ex-

claimed Redcliffe, "I should have fallen at your feet and worshipped you as an angel! This is the hour for the fullest explanations—and I came prepared to give them. Think you, Indora, that when first becoming a captive in your father's sovereign city, I yielded to his request to instruct your then youthful mind—for you were but fifteen years of age,—think you, I ask, that I accepted the duties of a preceptor from any love which I bore towards your father, who had deprived me of my freedom? Know you not that the King's action was one which we Europeans regard as the basest and the vilest? I went to the Court of Inderabad as an accredited emissary from the Anglo-Indian Government; and regardless of the laws of nations, your father held me captive. Reports were spread that I had perished, along with my suite, in one of your Indian jungles; and thus the authorities at Calcutta adopted no measures to procure my liberation. I found myself thrown entirely on my own resources; and methought that if I sedulously devoted myself to whatsoever tasks the King your father should prescribe unto me—and if they were honourable ones—he would be all the more speedily moved to compassion, and would give me my freedom. And then, too, I thought that if I aided in the expansion of your natural intelligence—if I taught you our European accomplishments,—and by such inculcations as I was enabled to impart, rendered you the most brilliant Princess of all the northern and independent region of the great peninsula of Hindostan,—you would experience a gratitude which would raise me up a friend to intercede with that King who held me in captivity. And perhaps, too, I was flattered somewhat—for I was much younger *then*—by finding myself placed in a position and furnished with an opportunity to carry European civilization into the midst of the oriental barbarism of your father's kingdom; and therefore did I address myself readily, and even cheerfully, to the tasks that were allotted to me. But that gratitude, Indora, which I expected at your hands—I received it not!"

"No — not gratitude!" replied the Indian Princess, suddenly starting with the enthusiasm of her feelings: "it was naught so cold as mere gratitude that I gave you—it was my love!"

"Ah! but that love was so far fatal to me," rejoined Redcliffe, "that it prolonged my captivity. Do you recollect, Indora, that on one occasion I even humbled myself at your very feet to implore my release from your father's capital?"

"I remember it, alas! but too well," responded the eastern lady. "It was when an English traveller was found dead—slain by robbers in a wood near the city—and when the papers and documents he had about him were brought to the palace——"

"Yes!" cried Redcliffe, with exceeding bitterness, and as a strange look that was akin to rage swept over his countenance: "for amongst those papers there was an English journal which contained something that regarded myself. Yes, Indora—it *was* after reading that journal that I threw myself at your feet, and besought you to give that consent which your Royal father had already vouchsafed, but which you had refused to second."

"I know it but too well," answered the Princess, who had shrunk back in mournful dismay from the strange look which Redcliffe's countenance had transiently expressed; "and I repeat, it was a crime on my part—a foul treachery, whereof I have since deeply and sincerely repented. But why all these reiterations? why taunt me thus with what I have done? Heaven knows——and I speak of that heaven into the holy mysteries of which you yourself initiated me by the inculcation of the Christian creed——Heaven knows, I say, that I erred through love—that I was guilty through my mad fondness for you! Oh, use not my conduct of that time as a pretext and as an excuse for proclaiming a decision which is to consign me to despair! There is no other misdeed with which you can reproach me, Clement Redcliffe. I was in my girlhood when first you knew me:—for long years had you your eye ever upon me—and you know whether my life has been stainless and immaculate or not?"

"Indora," answered Redcliffe, now evidently much moved, "not for a single instant can I hesitate to do justice to your numerous virtues. I admitted, when we were together eight days back, that I had received much good as well as much evil at the hands of your father and yourself. The riches which I possess, were conferred upon me by your sire: but I felt that I had earned them—or else not a single one of the priceless gems and the costly gifts which had been showered upon me, should I have borne away with me when I at length succeeded in effecting my escape! Nevertheless, though I earned all that wealth by long years of devoted application to the tasks prescribed me by your father, I am not the less grateful to the source whence those riches emanated. All this I do not deny: on the contrary I wish you to understand the precise feelings of my heart;—for this is an occasion of no ordinary importance, inasmuch as I see, alas! that the happiness of a fellow creature is deeply involved."

"You pity me?" said Indora: and hope flashed in her fine dark eyes.

"Yes—I pity you," responded Redcliffe,—"if neither as a woman nor a Princess you consider the avowal to be an insult. But I was about to declare that had you, Indora, behaved more generously towards me—had you frankly, and with that nobleness of heart for which I once gave you credit—consented to my freedom when your Royal father had agreed thereto, it might have been—— yes, it might have been different now! I should have retained such a deep impression of gratitude towards you, that whatsoever sacrifice of my own feelings it might have cost to ensure your happiness, the word—the affirmative syllable—might possibly have gone forth from my lips! Ah, Indora, think you that I can forget how I flung myself at your feet on the same day that I read in the English journal—it was two years ago—that which so nearly concerned myself? think you that I can forget how I besought, and entreated, and wept—and all so vainly? And in the wildness of the language to which I gave vent, I even said enough to give you at least some faint insight into those reasons so urgent—so vitally important to myself—which had suddenly transpired to render me more than ever anxious to retain my liberty. And yet you refused!"

"Clement," responded Indora, the tears now gushing forth from her eyes, streaming down her

cheeks, and trickling upon the bosom which palpitated as if it would burst,—"you yourself were a witness of the almost mortal anguish which it cost me to pronounce that refusal. I bade you abandon all thoughts of returning to a land which, from the few words you let drop, I saw but too well you had no reason to love: I offered you my hand—— I, a great Princess, humbled myself far more to you, than you, with all your pride of an Englishman, could possibly humble yourself to me!——I gave you the assurance that my father would consent to our union—that you yourself might become a Prince—that at his death the diadem of Inderabad should descend upon your brows—and that you should sit upon a throne! But more than all this I offered you!——I offered you the fondest, most devoted love which woman's heart could entertain for man: and think you therefore, Clement Redcliffe, that when you refused all these proffers, I had no woman's pride that was wounded—and that perhaps for a moment there was some transient shade of vindictiveness strangely commingling with the very love that I bore you? Reflect upon all this! You yourself have taught me how weak and feeble is human nature—how poor the human heart! Can you not therefore make allowances for all that I felt and for all that I did on the occasion of which you have spoken? Besides, you should not judge me according to the severe rules by which you would estimate the conduct of a woman of your own native clime. No, no—it were too cruel—I am too much to be pitied—and you are too just!"

"You possess, Indora, too fine an intelligence, and feelings too delicately susceptible," answered Redcliffe, "to think that this last reason which you have urged, is the best and most forceful of any which you have as yet advanced. Remember that you are not altogether of Hindoo extraction. Your father is a native Prince—but your mother

was a Georgian; and hence the comparative fairness of your complexion. But we must not argue longer on the subject. You now understand me, Indora, much better perhaps than ever you did before; and I on the other hand am willing to believe that you yourself regret that portion of your conduct which must be but too well calculated to inspire such remorseful feeling. Therefore I appeal to your generosity—I appeal to that feminine delicacy which characterizes you—I appeal to all those good and virtuous principles which have rendered your life so stainless,—by all these I appeal that you will accept my decision as a final one——and this decision is, that we part now to meet no more!"

The Princess Indora pressed her hand to her brow; and a faint half-stifled shriek burst from her lips. The next moment, in a paroxysm of indescribable agony, she threw herself upon her knees; and extending her clasped hands towards Redcliffe, cried in a frantic voice, "You are killing me! you are killing me!"

"For heaven's sake give not thus way to your feelings!"—and he hastened to raise her up.

It seemed as if she were about to faint: she clung to him—and her head drooped upon his breast. He was forced to sustain her: but he gently placed her upon the ottoman—and standing before her, he said, "Indora, if you ever loved me, I beseech you to fulfil your promise and respect my decision!"

She had for a moment covered her countenance with her hands; and her entire form was shaken with a low convulsive sob. Slowly now she removed those hands; and looking up towards the Englishman with such ineffable woe depicted upon her features that it made his very heart bleed to contemplate the spectacle, she said in the profound voice of despair, "Yes—I will respect your decision."

Clement Redcliffe was about to extend his hand and bid the Princess a last farewell,—when a thought struck him—and he lingered: but still he knew not how to shape the request which he had to make—for a request it was.

"Indora," at length he said, "I will not ask if it is with a feeling of anger you are about to behold me go forth from your presence—because I know that from all you have been saying, you are no longer capable of experiencing the slightest vindictiveness towards me."

"No, Clement Redcliffe," she answered solemnly, but at the same time with a visible effort keeping back an ebullition of the strongest feelings: "rather than do you an injury, I would lay down my life to serve you!"

The Englishman was profoundly touched by this assurance. The reader has seen enough of him to be aware that he was naturally generous-hearted—indeed of a fine chivalrous character, notwithstanding that so large a portion of his life had been spent in captivity, and that this circumstance, as well as others, had tended to sour his mind and warp some of his better feelings. Yes—he was generous-hearted; and the assurance which the unfortunate Princess had just given, could not fail to touch him profoundly. Besides, he would have been something less or something more than man if he had remained altogether inaccessible to the impression which that fond woman's devoted love was so well calculated to make—even though it were a love which he himself could not reciprocate. It therefore cut him to the very soul—it made his heart bleed—it awakened sensibilities which he had fancied crushed, or at least buried in eternal slumber—it staggered the very resolve which had ere now gone forth from his lips!

He resumed his seat on the sofa—perhaps a little nearer to the Princess than he was placed during all the former part of the interview; and she followed him with her eyes, in which some faint gleam of hope glittered again—but yet so feebly, because she dared not allow herself to entertain it.

"Indora," suddenly exclaimed Redcliffe, with almost passionate vehemence—and such a paroxysm of feeling was indeed most rare on his part,—"it is impossible I can leave you thus! I regret having said anything that might seem to savour of reproach: I am sorry that I should have dwelt so long and so emphatically on your conduct in prolonging my captivity in India. But heavens! if you were aware of all the mischief which was thus entailed upon me——and you *can* in part comprehend it, from those words which I let drop on the memorable occasion when I knelt at your feet by the side of the marble fountain in the palace of Inderabad——Oh! if you knew all you would pardon any bitterness that tinctured my words!"

"It would be impossible, Clement," answered the Princess mildly—almost meekly, "for *you* to give me offence. My unfortunate love has tamed my disposition: I no longer think and feel with the pride of a King's daughter—but with the humility and the suffering of a poor weak woman!"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Redcliffe, visibly struggling with himself as the resolve which he had pronounced was more and more staggered by each successive proof of Indora's illimitable devotion: "how can I endure to torture you, while you display so much goodness?"

He rose and paced the apartment with hurried and uneven steps. That man whose wont it was to be so mournfully grave and so coldly reserved—so shut up, as it were, in the secret sorrows of his own inscrutable heart—was now a prey to the profoundest agitation. Indora followed him with her eyes: that very agitation afflicted her on the one hand, while it partially seemed to encourage hope on the other; and the tears again streamed down her cheeks—again trickled upon the gorgeous bust which the open caftan and the low undergarment left half-revealed.

"Indora," said Redcliffe, abruptly resuming his seat by her side, "I cannot leave you thus—my very nature revolts against it! And yet for heaven's sake buoy not up yourself with immediate hope: for *that* could not possibly be fulfilled at once——No, sternly and implacably should I refuse, even though you were at this moment at the point of death and an affirmative syllable from my lips could alone save you! But yet——"

He stopped short: and it was with breathless suspense—with fixed eyes—dilated nostrils—lips apart—head bent forward—and bosom upheaved, that Indora sat in the attitude of one who awaits a sound which she expects to hear but which she is afraid may escape her.

"Princess," continued Redcliffe, "allusion has been made more than once during our interview, to those few words which I let drop from my lips when I knelt at your feet by the side of the marble fountain. To what precise extent the revelation contained in those words might have reached, I have no accurate remembrance: my thoughts were full of wildness at the time—my brain was distracted—the scene itself, when looked back upon, appears to be enveloped in a sort of misty dreaminess. However, that I *did* make some avowal—that I *did* let fall something in that unguarded moment—I recollect full well. I have now a request to make——"

"You need not give utterance to it," responded the Princess: "I can read your thoughts. You desire that the seal of secrecy shall remain upon my lips——Good heavens, Clement! do you think that I would betray a syllable that was calculated to do you an injury?"

"And after that assurance," exclaimed Redcliffe, "I dare not—I must not prove altogether ungrateful. Listen to me, Indora. You comprehend sufficient from those words which I let fall—and the necessity of keeping which inviolably secret you seem fully to understand—that my presence in England is connected with a matter of vital importance to myself. Yes—I have a specific object to accomplish; and to that must all my thoughts and all my energies be devoted. It may be achieved quickly; or it may take years to be worked out——heaven alone can tell! But that same heaven can by its own inscrutable ways further my objects and conduct them to a speedy and a successful issue. Until that issue be accomplished, I am not master of my own actions—I am not even able to dispose of myself. But this is what I have to say, Indora—that if when my purpose is achieved, and if circumstances should leave me a free agent, then will I be mindful of this devoted love of your's—and then you shall not vainly implore at my feet!"

"Oh, is this possible?" exclaimed the delighted Princess: and sinking upon her knees, she took Redcliffe's hand, pressing it in fervour to her lips.

"Rise, Indora—rise! This suppliant posture must not be assumed to me!"

"But you have given me hope—I am no longer miserable——I am happy——Oh, I am joyously happy!"—and she sprang up to her feet, her magnificent countenance radiant with the altered feelings that were thus suddenly excited in her soul.

"Cherish that hope if you will, Indora," said the Englishman,—"cherish it if it will make you happy—and I swear to you that if circumstances permit, it shall be fulfilled! But until that time, think not to behold me again."

"Oh! I can endure separation so long as there is hope," exclaimed the Princess, in a tone of gushing enthusiasm. "I have waited so long to receive from your lips a single syllable of hope, that I can wait longer yet for that hope's realization. But tell me——you say when the time shall come——are you confident that it *will* come sooner or later?"

"Yes—it will come," answered Redcliffe,—"it will come, rest assured!—or there would be no justice in heaven itself!"

With these words he abruptly quitted the room; and Indora, sinking upon the ottoman, almost overcome with the joyousness of her feelings, murmured to herself, "There is hope! there is hope!"

Notwithstanding the violent agitation which Clement Redcliffe had experienced towards the close of this interview, the instant the door of the drawing-room shut behind him, he regained his habitual air of mournful gravity: so that it would have been impossible for any observer to gather from his looks a single scintillation of what had been passing. He descended the staircase, and found Sagoonah waiting in the hall to afford him egress. He put on his cloak—took up his hat—and was turning towards the door with an abruptness of movement which he often unconsciously displayed,—when again he caught the eyes of the Hindoo woman fixed upon him with the strange burning brightness of their regards. He stopped short instinctively: those eyes were instantaneously veiled by their long jetty fringes—the intenseness of the spell which had for a moment riveted him, was thus as suddenly withdrawn—and in silence he hurried forth from Shrubbery Villa. But as he sped along the bye-lane leading to the main road, he again felt as if he were under the incomprehensible spell-like influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

The Hindoo woman, having closed the front door behind Mr. Redcliffe, ascended the stairs, and glided into the drawing-room with her wonted noiseless step. Sinking upon her knees at the feet of the Princess, she looked up into her countenance—and at once read there an answer to the question which, as a slave, she scarcely dared ask. For an instant Sagoonah's eyes flashed brightly; and then they were cast down again.

"I understand you, my faithful dependant," said Indora, passing her beautifully modelled hand caressingly over the Hindoo woman's jet black hair, so smoothly brushed. "The kind interest you feel in me renders you impatient to know the result. You have partially read it on my features—and your eyes glistened with a sensation of joy. Yes, Sagoonah—I am no longer in a state of uncertainty—I am permitted to hope!"

The Hindoo woman took the Princess's hand, and raised it to her lips. At the same time Indora felt a burning tear-drop fall upon that hand; and again caressing the dependant, she said in a kind soothing voice, "You weep for joy, my faithful Sagoonah—you weep for joy!—and I love you for this fresh evidence of your devoted affection."

Sagoonah kissed her mistress's hand once more; and slowly rising from her kneeling posture, she retreated to a little distance,—her tall symmetrical shape drawn up as usual, so that it displayed the beautiful bend of the back, the straightness of all the limbs, and the sculptural modelling of all the contours. Her countenance was inclined (as was its wont when she was in that position) towards her bosom; and she remained motionless as a statue.

"Sagoonah," said the Princess, after a long pause, during which she reflected profoundly, "tell Mark to come to me at once."

The dependant quitted the room; and in a few minutes a man-servant made his appearance. He

was dressed in plain clothes,—a neat suit of black, with a white cravat. He was of the middle age—quiet and sedate-looking—but with a certain honesty and frankness of countenance which would at once have prepossessed a beholder in his favour. He bowed low to Indora, and stood in silence to await her commands. We should observe that although he knew full well that she was of princely rank, yet he addressed her not, when speaking, with the highest title properly belonging thereto, but with an inferior one: for in order to avoid unpleasant observation and gossiping curiosity, Indora passed not as a Princess in England, but merely as a wealthy lady of Hindostan. Two female dependants (Sagoonah and another) together with a native male-servant, had accompanied her from Inderabad. The Englishman, whose Christian name was Mark, had been hired by her at Calcutta to serve as her intendant, steward, and butler—the comptroller, in short, of her little household. He therefore knew who she was: but Sagoonah *alone* of those who had accompanied her from India, was acquainted with the real object of her Highness's visit to England. It was Mark who on the arrival in London had procured the villa for the Princess's accommodation; and in all respects he had proved himself efficient and trustworthy. While we are speaking of the household, we may as well add that besides the domestics already mentioned, there was a groom and coachman: for the Princess had at once bought a carriage and a pair of horses on settling at the villa. The coachman did not sleep in the house—the groom occupied an apartment over the stables; and these two last-named dependants were in total ignorance of the high rank of their mistress.

We may now continue the thread of our narrative,—taking it up at the point where Mark had entered the drawing-room in pursuance of the summons sent by the Princess through Sagoonah.

"Is it possible, Mark," inquired Indora, "to obtain any English newspapers that go back for several years?"

"All English newspapers, please your ladyship," was the domestic's response, "are filed at certain places in London; and it is even possible sometimes to purchase a complete set of any particular newspaper."

"In that case," resumed Indora, with satisfaction upon her countenance, "I must get you, the very first thing to-morrow, to procure me a file for the last twenty years. Do you think you can accomplish it? Spare not gold——"

"Everything, please your ladyship, can be procured in this country by means of money. By noon to-morrow I pledge myself that your ladyship shall be in possession of a file of newspapers."

The domestic then bowed and withdrew.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRUGGLES.

Two months had elapsed since the occurrences which we have been relating; and it now verged towards the close of December. During these two months poor Mary Wright had breathed her last, and was consigned to the grave. Almost daily did Christina visit the perishing creature; and for hours would she at times remain with her,—assisting the nurse and the landlady of the house in their kind assiduities towards smoothing the progress of the victim to another world. Mr. Redcliffe called occasionally to inquire at the front door how the invalid was: but he never sought her presence—he did not choose to be thanked for all that he was doing for her. His purse however afforded ample proof of the generous sympathy which he experienced on her behalf: for she was not merely surrounded with comforts, but even with luxuries. Her benefactor's conduct in thus avoiding her presence, may appear eccentric: but on the other hand, it was full of kindness and consideration. Frequently would the most delicious and expensive fruits be delivered at the house,—fruits that must have cost gold in Covent Garden Market; and there was no difficulty in conjecturing from whom they came. When she breathed her last, Mr. Redcliffe gave instructions that her remains were to be decently interred; and he liberally rewarded the nurse, the landlady, and the medical attendant.

He would have rewarded Christina likewise, only he knew not that she stood in need of succour; and he would have been afraid of insulting her by offering her any testimonial of his appreciation of her goodness towards the perished one. Well aware was he of this goodness: he had not merely learnt in the first instance how Christina had behaved when she visited Mary Wright in Redcross Street—but he had also been informed by the landlady of the house at Islington, of Miss Ashton's frequent visits there. But it so happened that whenever Mr. Redcliffe called, Christina never came up to the door at the same time; so that since that encounter in Redcross Street, Mr. Redcliffe and the twins had not once met. Christian was in the habit of seeing his sister as far as the house, it being at no very great distance from their own lodging at Camden Town; and then he would set off in search of a situation,—returning at an hour previously appointed, to fetch his sister and conduct her home again.

But during these two months Christian had found no situation and Christina no work. They had both used every endeavour to procure such employment as was respectively fitted for each—and they had failed. There seemed at this period of the orphans' lives to be a kind of fatality which influenced them with its evil spell. We need not enter into particulars in respect to the numerous applications made by each in countless quarters, nor the nature of the refusals—sometimes rebuffs—which they had to encounter. They had called upon Mrs. Macaulay: but she was unable to give them any recommendations to particular quarters; and, as the reader is aware, they were in all other respects friendless—those two poor orphans—in the great metropolis. Mrs. Macaulay, having perceived several instances of Mr. Redcliffe's charitable disposition, had thought of mentioning to him the gloomy prospects of the twins: but somehow or another she always forgot to do so when she had an opportunity. These opportunities were indeed rare enough—for Mr. Redcliffe, soon discovering that she was of a gossiping character, invariably cut her short whenever she seemed to threaten him with a long discourse.

Never in the presence of Mary Wright, while she yet remained alive, did Christina drop the slightest allusion to her own position—though it had daily been becoming worse and worse; and many and many an hour did she give to the dying young woman, when, but for her, she would have been roaming about from place to place, wherever there appeared a chance of procuring needle work.

Before continuing the narrative, we must remark, in addition to the above explanations, that during the time which had elapsed since the orphans quitted Mrs. Macaulay's house, they had seen nothing more of Lord Octavian Meredith. They had requested that Mrs. Macaulay would not mention their new abode to that Mr. Percival who had once called, if he should happen to call again. The twins had their own little pride as well as other people; and they did not choose to be visited in their more humble lodging by one who was evidently moving in the best sphere of society. Besides, Christina herself had felt that for other reasons, which her feminine delicacy naturally suggested, it would be better that such an acquaintance should be discontinued. Not, be it understood, that she knew or even suspected that under the name of Mr. Percival an aristocratic title was disguised: but a becoming sense of propriety made her comprehend that situated as she was, with no other protector than a brother of her own age—a mere youth—it were imprudent to receive the visits of a fashionable young gentleman of whom she knew comparatively nothing.

The reader will recollect that we glanced hurriedly at the resources possessed by the orphans when they left Mrs. Macaulay's: we stated that in addition to a good stock of clothes, they had some fourteen or fifteen pounds in money, besides a few articles of jewellery of some value. The outlay on Mary Wright's part had made a certain inroad upon the pecuniary portion of those resources: their lodgings were ten shillings a week—they had now occupied them exactly nine weeks—and therefore it is easy to calculate that by this time their money was exhausted. They had lived with all possible frugality, allowing themselves mere necessaries; and as day by day went by, beholding the gradual decrease of their money-stock, until the very last sixpence was expended,—those same successive days bringing no brightening prospect in respect to the chances of obtaining employment,—the poor orphans naturally grew more and more dispirited.

And now at length the day came when they had no money left. What was to be done? To seek assistance of Mrs. Macaulay, was out of the question. They did not altogether understand her mercenary disposition—they did not precisely expect a refusal, if they did address themselves to her: but they felt that they had no right to do so—that they had no claim upon her—and that even if they had, they saw no chance of fixing a date for the refunding of any loan which she might advance. The orphans deliberated mournfully and tearfully. They embraced each other—they endeavoured to impart mutual consolation: but it was all in vain—for they had none to offer. Yet something must be done! Christina's mind was made up: she could suffer privations herself—but she could not endure the idea that her beloved brother should want bread. He himself was racked by the same thought on her behalf; and he was about to propose that he should go and do that which Christina herself had resolved upon doing. It was in the afternoon of a chill December day when this deliberation took place; and Christina, on a certain pretext, got her brother to go off to some distance. She spoke of a place where he had called a few days back to ask for employment as a clerk: he had received no decisive answer, though the evasive one was almost tantamount to a refusal;—and his sister now suggested that he should go and apply once more. She knew—or at least she feared, that the walk would be an unavailing one; and it cut her to the quick to think that her poor brother's feelings were again to be wounded by a rebuff. But still she preferred that he should even endure this, than have to experience that still deeper humiliation which in the love she bore him she now purposed to take upon herself.

Christian set out; and when he was gone, Christina unlocked her work-box, lifted out the upper part, and drew forth a small packet tied round with tape. She unfastened the tape—she opened the packet—and tears trickled down her lovely pale cheeks, as she contemplated the articles therein contained. One was a long tress of raven hair—a tress that must have constituted part of a luxuriant mass which might have formed the glory of a queen—aye, or the envy of one. This tress the poor girl placed to her lips, and kissed it reverently, devoutly—and, Oh, how sadly!—while the tears trickled faster and faster down her cheeks.

"Oh, my mother!" she murmured to herself; "you whom I never knew—you who were snatched away from us long ere we had intelligence to appreciate your loss!—you who must be a saint in heaven!—look down and compassionate your poor orphans who have already commenced their hard struggle with the world!"

Christina's bosom was convulsed with sobs, as she thus mentally apostrophized the authoress of her being; and through the tears that dimmed her eyes, she gazed steadfastly upon that long dark tress which she held in her hand. It was one which seemed as if it might have belonged to her own head—of such raven darkness was it, and of such silky fineness. She replaced it in her work-box, carefully enveloped however in a piece of tissue-paper; and then she drew forth a watch from the packet which she had opened. It was a beautiful gold watch, of delicate fashion and exquisite workmanship, and fitted for a lady. Many, many pounds might have been raised upon it—at least many, many pounds in the estimation of those who were penniless; and Christina was already calculating that the produce of this watch would enable her brother and herself to subsist for many, many weeks—when a compunctious thought smote her, and she laid it down. Then she took up two rings; and these also she contemplated with a deep and mournful interest. One was a wedding-ring—the other, likewise a lady's, of no considerable value but of exquisite workmanship. Again did the compunctious feeling strike the sensitive girl; and as the tears now rained down her cheeks, she murmured, "No, mother! we will starve—we will perish, sooner than part with these memorials which we possess of you!"

The watch and the two rings were replaced in the packet, which was folded up and carefully tied; and the work-box was locked again. Then Christina went to her own trunk; and selecting her best dress and shawl, she enveloped them in a handkerchief and issued forth from the lodging-house. The poor girl bent her way to the nearest pawnbroker's shop. It was now completely dusk—the gas was lighted inside—the plate and jewellery in the window shone with resplendence. Christina lingered for a few moments at the shop-door: but she had not the courage to enter—and she passed along the street. Again did the tears stream from her eyes at the thought of the distressing position to which her brother and herself were reduced. Then she recollected that he would return presently, fatigued with his walk—hungry too, as he had gone forth; and that there was not a morsel of bread at the lodging for him to eat. She abruptly turned back—wiped the tears from her eyes—and mustering up all her courage, sped in the direction of the pawnbroker's shop. A loutish-looking boy was gazing in at the window, devouring all the fine things with his eyes: but as Miss Ashton approached the door, he suddenly looked round, and with a coarse grin said, "Ah, young o'oman! it's easier to take things there than to git 'em out agin."

It was not that the fellow ill-naturedly intended to wound the poor girl's feelings: but his words had that effect,—piercing indeed like a barbed arrow into her heart; for she was in that desponding, almost wretched state of mind, when any incident of this sort suddenly assumes the aspect of an ominous prediction to be fearfully fulfilled. With almost a preternatural effort she kept back the tears that were again ready to start forth from her beauteous black eyes; and in a fit of desperation she rushed into the shop.

The pawnbroker, with spectacles upon his nose and pen stuck behind his ear, bent a scrutinizing glance upon the young girl, so as to assure himself, as far as such survey would, that she had not stolen the articles she came to pledge:—and then he examined them. She was ready to sink with shame during the process—and all the more so, as in the middle of it a couple of ill-looking half-tipsy women came in, with brazen effrontery in their looks—for *they* were not humiliated at the thought of being seen in such a place. The pawnbroker asked her how much she required upon the articles: but she was so confused that she was unable to utter a word. The man's experience in such matters at once enabled him to detect the difference between shrinking bashfulness and conscious dishonesty: he therefore received the pledges—handed her over thirty shillings, together with a small ticket—and Christina hurried out of the shop, infinitely relieved at escaping from the coarse looks and jeering whispers of the two women.

She purchased provisions, and re-entered the lodging. When her brother returned from his unavailing errand, his eyes instantaneously glanced from the food which was spread upon the table, towards his sister—and he burst into tears. He comprehended in a moment the generosity of her purpose in sending him temporarily out of the way; and he embraced her fervently. But then a painful idea smote him; and through his tears he again glanced—but now with anxious inquiry—towards Christina. She comprehended what he meant, and at once reassured him by explaining what she had done, and that the little memorials which they possessed of their long dead mother had not been touched. They sat down to eat; but it was with no small degree of bitterness that they partook of the food obtained by money raised from such a source.

Christian rose very early on the following morning, and told his sister that he should renew his inquiries after a place, notwithstanding the disappointments he had already experienced. She replied that she also should go about to solicit work, and begged her brother to return in a few hours to escort her for the purpose. He promised that he would; and he sallied forth. Repairing to a neighbouring coffee-house, he carefully inspected the advertising columns of the newspapers; and his eyes settled upon an announcement to the effect that a young man of intelligence, and who wrote a gentlemanly hand, was required by a nobleman as an amanuensis, or private secretary. Application was to be made at a particular address in Piccadilly. Off set Christian in that direction—we cannot exactly say with hope in his heart, because he had already experienced so many disappointments and rebuffs: but at least he was determined not to lose the opportunity for want of following it up. On arriving in Piccadilly and reaching the particular address indicated, he found that it was a jeweller's shop. He thought there must be some mistake: but as the number of the house was precisely that specified in the newspaper advertisement, he resolved to inquire. Entering the shop, he addressed himself to one of the serving-men; and on naming his business, was at once informed that it was the proper place at which to apply in the first instance. Then the shopman gave Christian a card, and recommended him to go at once, as there had already been several applicants for the situation.

The youth felt that the advice given was somewhat cheering, inasmuch as it appeared to promise that he would not be considered too young for the employment which he sought. He looked at the card, and found that it was that of the Duke of Marchmont, whose residence was in Belgrave Square. Christian had never, to his knowledge, heard the name mentioned before; and he was stricken with timidity at the thought of appearing as the candidate for a situation with a nobleman of so lofty a rank: but he was not to be deterred by any such feeling from making the attempt—and he was soon in Belgrave Square. The Duke of Marchmont was at home; and when Christian mentioned his business, one of the numerous powdered and liveried lacqueys who were lounging in the hall, conducted the youth to a sumptuously furnished apartment, where his Grace, enveloped in a splendid silk morning-gown, was lounging on a sofa, reading the newspapers—for it was yet early in the forenoon.

We must observe that Christian took great care of his clothes: he was neatly dressed—and from the description already given of him, we need scarcely add that he was not merely respectable-looking, but of an unsurpassable gentility. The Duke, slowly turning his head without raising himself up, and lazily depositing the newspaper by his side, surveyed Christian attentively; and

then said, "So you have come after the situation of amanuensis?"

"Yes, my lord," was the youth's response: and he trembled with the nervous anxiety of mingled hope and fear.

"First of all," said the Duke, "before we speak another word upon the matter, sit down at the table and give me a specimen of your writing."

His Grace then took up the newspaper again, and continued the reading of an article in the midst of which he had left off. Christian sat down; and now that the Duke's eyes were no longer upon him, he felt much less embarrassed than at first. He took up a pen—opened a book which lay near—and began to copy on a sheet of paper a portion of its contents. His hand trembled as he first took up that pen: but when he thought of all that was at stake—of how much seemed to depend on this initiative test of his capacities—of his beloved sister Christina—and how she had parted with her raiment on the preceding evening—when he thought too of how joyous his heart would be if he were enabled to return and tell her that he had succeeded at length in procuring a situation,—he was suddenly inspired with a fortitude which surprised himself; and his hand trembled no more.

"That's enough, I dare say, for me to judge by," exclaimed the Duke, at the expiration of about five minutes: and Christian hastened to proffer the paper on which he had been writing. "This is excellent!" cried Marchmont: "the very thing! a most gentlemanly hand! I suppose, my lad, you have been well educated?"

Christian replied, with a becoming modesty, that he had certainly been at a good school, and that he hoped he had profited by that opportunity for instructing himself.

"It's the very sort of handwriting that I wanted," proceeded the Duke,—"a gentleman's, and not a clerk's. I have had three or four applications this morning—and none would suit. There was one fellow who covered a sheet of paper with as many flourishes as a writing-master—so that my letters would have had the air of so many tradesmen's circulars. You see, young man, I have a great number of letters of various sorts to answer; and as I dislike the trouble of it, my correspondence gets confoundedly into arrear. So I have resolved to take an amanuensis, who will sometimes write to my dictation, and at others make out a good letter from the passing hints I may give him, and from the nature of the correspondence which will in itself be suggestive of the proper response. Now, do you think you can manage this?"

"I should not hesitate, my lord, to undertake it with confidence," answered Christian, hope rising still higher in his soul. "But if your Grace would give me some letter to put my capacity to a farther test——"

"No, no—I don't think it is necessary," interrupted the Duke. "You are well spoken, and genteel—which last is another great recommendation in your favour. I think that I may safely give you a trial. The terms I propose are fifty guineas a-year; and as you will live in the house, you will of course have nothing to find except your clothes."

"Live in the house, my lord," murmured Christian, hope sinking again to the very bottom of his heart, where it became well nigh extinguished: for the thought of separating from Christina was not to be endured.

"Oh, yes," said the Duke, carelessly; "you must live in the house, so that you may always be at hand: because it is not to be supposed that I can ever be ready at stated hours to attend to my correspondence."

"My lord, I am exceedingly sorry——I deeply regret——the situation would have pleased me so——but, but——" and the tears came into the poor youth's eyes.

"Why, what's the matter?" demanded Marchmont sharply. "If it don't suit you, you can retire—and there's an end of the business."

"Oh, my lord, it suits me—it would be the saving of me!" exclaimed Christian, with much feeling. "But I have a sister dependent on me—we are orphans—I could not separate from her——"

"A sister?" observed the Duke: and it immediately struck him that if she were as beautiful as Christian himself was handsome, he should have no objection to become acquainted with her. "And pray how old is your sister?"

"My own age, my lord: we are twins."

"Twins, eh?" ejaculated Marchmont, more and more interested: for now he felt convinced that there *must* be a great similitude between the brother and sister, and therefore no doubt remained as to the beauty of the latter. "And pray, how old are you?"

"Seventeen and a half, my lord," replied Christian.

"And what is your name?" inquired Marchmont.

"Christian Ashton," was the response.

The Duke was somewhat struck by the name: he thought he had heard it before: he reflected for a few moments—and all of a sudden it occurred to him that Lord Octavian Meredith had mentioned the name of Ashton as that of the beautiful creature for whom he had fought the duel with Mr. Stanhope. But the Duke did not suffer Christian to perceive that he was in any way struck by the name; and after a pause, he quietly asked, "Where do you live?"

The youth named the address in Park Street, Camden Town; and Marchmont recollected that it was not the same mentioned to him by Lord Octavian as that where his Grace was to call in the event of Meredith succumbing in the duel. But all in a moment another thought flashed to Marchmont's mind. Octavian had represented his "fair unknown" as having been seen walking with a youth whom by the striking likeness he knew to be her brother. Putting two and two together, the Duke, who was cunning enough in such matters, began to surmise that Miss Ashton must have been Octavian's "fair unknown." But still there was the discrepancy in regard to the address; and this was to be cleared up, in order to prove that Christian's sister was really the same Miss Ashton who had caused the duel, and whose identity with the "fair unknown" the Duke more than half suspected.

"Have you lived long in Park Street, Camden Town?" he inquired, as if in a careless manner.

"Between nine and ten weeks, my lord. Pre-

viously to our removal thither," continued Christian, ingenuously giving his explanations with all becoming candour and frankness, "we dwelt in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square."

The Duke's uncertainty was now completely dissipated; and his mind was made up to take Christian into his service.

"Well, my lad," he said, "I should much rather that you would come and live in the house: but if you object, it shall not stand as a barrier in the way of an arrangement. You appear to suit me in every other respect; and therefore it is a bargain. Go and consult your sister: but I think that if you were wise, you would make up your mind to dwell beneath my roof, and your sister could occupy a lodging somewhere in the neighbourhood—so that you might often be with her when not engaged in writing. I don't suppose you will have more than a couple of hours' work every day; and you would therefore have ample time to pass with your sister. But take your choice—return to me to-morrow morning at this same hour—and let me know your decision. The place is your's, whichsoever way it may be: I promise you that much."

Christian issued forth from the presence of the Duke of Marchmont. He could scarcely restrain his joy as he crossed the spacious landing ornamented with vases and sculptures—as he descended the superb marble staircase—as he traversed the hall where the livery-servants were lounging about, and where an old porter of corpulent form and jolly countenance, sat in his great leathern chair, reading a newspaper. But when Christian had cleared the threshold of the palatial portals, his heart swelled with such exultation that tears of bliss started from his eyes. He was happy: never had he felt so happy! It was a species of intoxication of the brain that he experienced. To think that when his hopes were at the very lowest, he should thus have procured a situation that was higher than his most ambitious soarings! He sped through the square—he ran along the streets—he leaped into the first omnibus that would take him near to his destination. It seemed as if no journey was ever so long—he was so anxious to reach his humble home, and impart the joyous intelligence to his dearly beloved twin-sister!

But before Christian reaches the lodging, let us see what Christina herself has been doing in the interval. Her brother had gone out early, as the reader will recollect—and had promised to return in a few hours to escort his sister in her search for needlework. Christina hastened to put their two little chambers into becoming order; and when she had done this, she descended to the landlady's own parlour, and began to consult her in respect to her position. Mrs. Giles was a good-natured woman, kind-hearted and benevolent—and considerably different from her acquaintance, Mrs. Macaulay. She had suspected for some little time past that the twins were not very comfortable in their circumstances; and she often had it on the tip of her tongue to speak some sympathizing words, or to proffer advice if she were enabled to afford any. But Christian and Christina had a certain pride of their own—a very natural one too—which prompted them to keep up their respectability as well as they could in the eyes of their landlady; and though they were most courteous and affable towards her, they had never thrown themselves in the way of any lengthy discourse. Now however Christina had laid aside all that sense of shame which had hitherto kept her silent: she frankly told Mrs. Giles how her brother and herself were situated—and expressed her fears that they must surrender up their present lodging and betake themselves to a still cheaper one.

"My dear young lady," answered Mrs. Giles, "you need not vex and annoy yourself about your rent. Remain here as long as you like, and pay me when you can."

Christina expressed her deep gratitude to the worthy woman—but declared that neither she nor her brother would wilfully contract a debt which they had no immediate prospect of liquidating.

"I am not at all surprised," said the landlady, "that both yourself and your brother have failed in procuring such employments as you have sought. Master Ashton is too genteel to go and apply for a clerk's place,—because, being so young, he could only expect small remuneration, and an employer would fancy that he could not make a hard-working drudge of such an elegant gentlemanly young man who carries his fine spirit in his very countenance. As for needlework, my dear Miss Ashton, there are so many thousands and thousands of poor creatures scrambling to get whatever there is to do in that way, that a great many must of course go without."

"Yes—I feel that it is so," answered Christina, with a profound sigh. "I would do anything," she added, bursting into tears, "to earn bread for myself and my brother. I had intended to go again into the City presently, and inquire at some of the clothing marts for work: but a thought just now struck me—and I made up my mind to consult you on the subject. Do you think that I could possibly procure the situation of companion to some lady—or even the situation of maid——anything, in short, that would relieve my mind from the dreadful anxiety which now fills it. It would be hard——Oh! very hard to separate from my brother. I used to feel how hard it was when, as boy and girl, we parted to go to our respective schools after the holidays. But it would be harder still to see that poor brother of mine want bread;—and indeed I cannot bear the thought that day after day he runs about in weariness, seeking for employment—humbling himself to purse-proud men, and meeting rebuffs which cut him to the very soul and pierce mine also!"

Christina wept:—indeed for a few minutes she sobbed convulsively,—Mrs. Giles saying all she possibly could to cheer and console her.

"Ah! now I think of it," suddenly exclaimed the worthy woman, with joy upon her countenance, "I do really believe there is an opening for you!"

The young girl hastily wiped away her tears, and listened with eager suspense.

"My daughter," continued Mrs. Giles, "is housemaid in a nobleman's family close by here, in the Regent's Park. Jessy—that's my daughter's name—and a good girl she is too, though I say it—was here last evening; and she told me that her ladyship wanted a companion—some nice genteel young person——in a word, I am sure, Miss Ashton, that you would suit in every particular.

And her ladyship is so amiable, and good, and kind —and his lordship is such a nice man! They have not long been married——"

"Oh, if it were possible," exclaimed Christina, joy expanding in her heart, "that I could obtain such a situation!"

"I really think you will obtain it, Miss," answered the landlady: "and though I should be sorry to lose you as a lodger, I should nevertheless be well pleased to know that you were comfortably situated. You had better go about it at once."

"I will," cried the young girl: "and a thousand thanks to you for the intelligence you have given me and the kind wishes you have expressed."

Christina hastened up to her own chamber—put on the best apparel which she could command —and descended to Mrs. Giles's room again, to inquire the address to which she was to proceed. The landlady had already written it down for her; and Christina, with renewed thanks, issued forth from the house. As she entered the Regent's Park, she suddenly recollected the insulting conduct she had experienced on a former occasion; and she almost repented that she had not awaited her brother's return to escort her. But then, what happiness would it be for her if, when he came back to the lodging, she should be enabled to give him the assurance that thenceforth they would both have bread! The idea of separation was the only drawback to the happiness which Christina felt she should experience if her present mission proved successful: but still she argued with herself that when persons are enmeshed in difficulties, it is almost invariably necessary to make certain sacrifices in order to escape from them. Thus reflecting, she continued her way—she crossed the Regent's Park without experiencing any fresh insult—and she at length knocked at the

door of a house, of very genteel appearance, though not of very spacious dimensions.

To her inquiry whether Lady Octavian Meredith was at home and could be seen at such an early hour in the forenoon, she received an affirmative response—and was at once conducted to a parlour where Zoe, in a morning *deshabillée*, was seated upon a sofa. Christina was already prepossessed, by what Mrs. Giles had said, in favour of Lady Octavian Meredith: but her good opinion was enhanced at the very first glance which she flung upon Mr. Armytage's daughter. It was not so much that the exquisite beauty of Zoe interested the young girl, as that the goodness and sweetness depicted on Lady Octavian Meredith's lovely countenance, were well calculated to inspire confidence and hope. The dark velvet covering of the sofa threw out Zoe's form in admirable relief,—arrayed as it was in a light morning garb: her hair, without any ornament, showered in ringlets upon her shoulders; and it was with a gracious encouraging smile that Zoe, on learning Christina's business, bade her sit down.

Lady Octavian Meredith herself was struck with the extraordinary beauty of Christina—a beauty which was in such perfect contrast with her own,—inasmuch as Miss Ashton's hair and eyes were dark, while those of her ladyship were of a light angelic style. But it would have been difficult for an observer to decide which was the more beautiful of the two—although perhaps Christina might have carried off the palm.

There was no shade of jealousy—no, not even the slightest tinge thereof, in Zoe's disposition: and therefore when Miss Ashton announced the object of her visit, it did not for a single moment occur to Lady Octavian Meredith that there might possibly be some danger in introducing so transcendingly beautiful a creature into the house. Besides, in the same way that Christina was interested by Zoe's appearance—so was the latter at once prepossessed with regard to the former; and Lady Octavian Meredith found herself inwardly expressing the hope that the applicant would prove a suitable candidate for the position she had come to seek.

"It is perfectly true," said Zoe, in her sweet musical voice, "that I wish to enter into an engagement with a young lady who will live with me as a friend:"—for she could not utter the word *companion*, which in that particular sense might convey the offensive significancy of a toady. "Lord Octavian Meredith is, as a matter of course, frequently out: it is natural that he should seek those companions with whom his position enables him to associate; and I occasionally feel myself somewhat dull and lonely. You are aware that in what is called the fashionable world, visits are not paid until late in the afternoon, and then they are mere flying ones—and I am fain to confess, that the conversation is usually frivolous and unsatisfactory. Thus I am many hours alone; and I cannot always while away the time with my books, my music, or my work. Therefore I seek the friendship of a young lady of amiable manners, of intellectual acquirements, and of certain accomplishments. She may rely upon kind treatment: she shall never find herself in a false position—she shall be as one of the family—subject to no restraint nor coercion—and to be regarded as on a perfect equality with myself. I have been thus candid and frank—thus lengthy likewise in my explanations, so that you may at once understand, Miss Ashton, my requirement and all its circumstances."

The reader must bear in mind that Zoe was utterly ignorant of the acquaintance of her husband with Christina—equally unaware of the adventure in the Park nine weeks back—equally unaware also of the duel which had followed. On the other hand, Christina was as completely ignorant that accident had brought her to the house belonging to him whom she only knew as Mr. Percival—and of course equally ignorant that she was in the presence of that individual's wife.

"I thank your ladyship," answered Miss Ashton, "for the explanations you have given me; and I fully appreciate the delicate terms in which they have been conveyed. With equal frankness will I place before your ladyship the humble claims which I have to submit to your notice. I was well educated, and was instructed in some few accomplishments—though I am not vain enough to say that I possess any. I am fond of music—I love drawing in water colours or with pencil—I am equally attached to a certain style of reading—chiefly history, biography, books of travel, and such instructive works. I have every disposition to render myself agreeable and useful; and I may confidently add that I shall repay with gratitude whatsoever kindness is shown me. My position is somewhat a painful one. I have a twin-brother—and we are orphans. We are likewise friendless. A recent calamity has deprived us of the resources which we previously possessed—I allude to the sudden flight of a person who lived on the other side of the Regent's Park——"

"Do you mean Mr. Preston?" inquired Zoe, with some degree of surprise.

"The same, my lady," answered Christina.

"And it was my own father Mr. Armytage," rejoined Zoe, "who first discovered that man's delinquencies—and I regret to say that he too has suffered by them. Is he a relation of yours?"

"Oh, no, my lady!" responded Christina: "we have not to our knowledge any relations in the world. Our parents died when we were quite young: we were brought up by an uncle, who was a widower; and to him were we indebted for the good education we received. He died suddenly; and immediately after the funeral, Mr. Preston announced himself to us as the person to whom we had thenceforth to look for supplies of money. It was by his desire that we came up to London; and he regularly furnished us with an income until the period of his flight. Since then we have experienced troubles and afflictions——"

Here Christina stopped short and burst into tears. Lady Octavian Meredith was much affected by the orphan girl's narrative; and she spoke in a kind soothing manner. Christina, when again able to speak, informed her ladyship that she and her brother had resided six months at Mrs. Macaulay's, and upwards of two months at Mrs. Giles's,—both of whom could speak as to their characters and conduct.

"Mrs. Giles is a most respectable woman," observed Zoe; "and I am very certain that she would not recommend you to me unless perfectly assured that there was propriety in so doing. For-

give me if for a moment I have alluded to such matters as recommendations and so forth——"

"It is necessary, my lady—and it is better," replied Christina. "If I have the good fortune to please your ladyship, I should wish to enter your house in the fullest confidence that you are satisfied with me.'

"I am already satisfied, from everything which you have told me," rejoined Lady Octavian Meredith; "and I will request my husband to use his interest to procure some suitable situation for your brother. I can understand, from all you have said, that it would be painful for you to separate from that brother; but you have my free permission to receive him as often as he may choose to call upon you—the oftener the better: for it will do me good to behold you happy and contented. I am already much interested in you, Miss Ashton; and I am grateful that Mrs. Giles should have counselled you to visit my house to-day."

Christina expressed her warmest thanks for all these kind assurances; and Lady Octavian Meredith proceeded, in the most delicate and considerate manner, to intimate the terms which she proposed to offer any young lady whom she might select as her friend. In a word, the compact was formed; and Christina promised to remove to her ladyship's house on the morrow.

"I shall take the liberty of requesting Mrs. Giles," said Christina, when rising to depart, "to call upon your ladyship in the course of the day, that she may confirm, so far as she knows me, the representations that I have made; and as she is acquainted with my former landlady, she can give your ladyship such assurances as Mrs. Macaulay herself would impart if referred to."

"It is by no means necessary," answered Zoe: "but inasmuch as I see that it will satisfy you, Miss Ashton, you can bid Mrs. Giles call upon me presently."

Zoe rose from her seat, and extended her hand with sweetest affability to Christina—who, with renewed thanks and with joy in her heart, took her leave. Thus, while Christina was retracing her way across the Regent's Park — Christian, having alighted from the omnibus, was speeding along Albany Street, also in a homeward direction. Neither had the faintest suspicion of the good fortune which had suddenly smiled upon the other: each heart was full of joy on the other's account. But that of Christina was somewhat shaded, because in *her* case it was settled that she must separate from her brother; whereas in Christian's case it had been left by the Duke of Marchmont to his own option as to whether he should live at the mansion in Belgrave Square, or still continue to reside with his sister.

Christina reached the lodging first, and at once informed Mrs. Giles of the success of her visit to Lady Octavian Meredith. She likewise requested the worthy woman to call upon her ladyship in the course of the day.

"That I shall do with pleasure," was the response cheerfully given: "indeed I shall set off at once—and you may depend upon it, my dear young lady, I shall say everything in your favour which you so fully deserve."

Christina hastened up-stairs—and scarcely had she put off her walking apparel, when Christian came rushing up as if he were wild. He burst into the room; and folding his sister in a warm embrace, cried, "Joy, joy, darling Christina! I have succeeded at length."

"And I too, my beloved brother, have succeeded in something," she responded, with an almost equal exultation.

Christian contemplated her with surprise; and mutual explanations were speedily given. But Christian was now saddened at the idea of separating from his sister.

"His Grace," he said mournfully, "left it to me to decide whether I would live at his mansion, or continue to dwell with you; and I had arranged in my mind such a nice little plan of removing into the neighbourhood of Belgrave Square, so that we might be together——"

"But my dear brother," interrupted Christina, though with tears in her eyes, "we must resign ourselves to this separation. From what you have told me, the Duke of Marchmont offers you fifty guineas a-year—a most liberal sum if you dwell in his mansion—but it would instantly become a small one if you resided in lodgings and had to support me. Lady Octavian Meredith offers me sixty guineas a-year; and I am to dwell with her. We can both save considerably from our incomes; and perhaps, my dear brother, in the course of time our economies will enable us to reside together again. Besides, Lady Octavian assures me that the oftener you call upon me the better she shall be pleased; and the Duke of Marchmont has informed you that you will have plenty of time at your own disposal. We may see each other daily, or nearly every day: we may walk out together —— Oh! indeed, dear Christian, we shall make ourselves happy! And remember what a change these few brief hours have suddenly worked for us. Last night we ate the bread of bitterness: to-day we shall eat the bread of happiness. This morning we rose in mournfulness from our respective beds: to-night we shall lay ourselves upon our pillows with hope, consolation, and thankfulness in our hearts. We shall close our eyes in slumber without the dread of the morrow's awakening."

Christian could offer no remonstrances against this reasoning on his sister's part; and the arrangements were therefore to the effect that he should return in the course of the day to the Duke of Marchmont to state the decision to which he had come—so that on the morrow he might remove to his Grace's mansion, at the same time that his sister took up her residence with Lady Octavian Meredith.

In the course of a couple of hours Mrs. Giles returned from her visit to Zoe; and she now learnt the good fortune which had simultaneously overtaken Christian. She congratulated the twins with the most genuine sincerity; and placing an envelope in Christina's hand, said, "Lady Octavian Meredith is already so deeply interested in you, and is so fearful of losing you, that she has desired me to tender you this as a ratification of the compact."

Mrs. Giles then hastened from the room; and Christina, on opening the envelope, found that it contained a bank-note for twenty pounds. The orphans were deeply touched by this proof of Lady Octavian's generosity and kindness—and all the more so on account of the delicate manner in which the succour was conveyed.

Christian hastened off again to the Duke of Marchmont's residence; and when it was dusk, Christina went forth to redeem her wearing apparel from the pawnbroker's. With very different feelings from those which she had experienced on the previous evening, was it that she now entered the place; and she returned with a light heart to the lodging, to prepare a comfortable meal against her brother's re-appearance. And it *was* the bread of happiness which the twins ate that night—scarcely saddened by the idea of separation, because they felt it was for their mutual good.

But when the morrow came and the hour for separation arrived, they wept and renewed again and again the farewell embrace ere they tore themselves asunder.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BURKER.

THE scene which we are about to describe, occurred on the same evening as Christina's visit to the pawnbroker.

It was between nine and ten o'clock that a man of most ill-favoured appearance, emerged from one of the low courts opening from the New Cut, Lambeth; and bent his way in the direction of the maze of densely populated streets and alleys which lie between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. This man was about forty years of age; and it would be impossible to conceive a human exterior so repulsive, or so fearfully calculated to make the blood of a beholder curdle in the veins. There are some physiognomies which impress one with a capacity for particular sorts of mischief; there are features, for instance, which indicate low cunning—others denote violent passions—and there are others which reveal an instinctive thirst for blood. But all the most terrible attributes of the human mind were concentrated in the expression of that man's countenance. He had a small snub nose, which appeared to have been stuck on to his face as if it were an afterthought of nature: his mouth was large, and was furnished with a set of sharp pointed shark-like teeth, which being naturally white, and remaining so in defiance of neglect, glittered horribly between his coarse thick lips. His eyes were of the dark colour and expression of a reptile's; and the brows, by being traced irregularly—or else being brought down by an habitual lowering regard—added to the shuddering sensation produced by a look from those horrible eyes. His hair—of a light brown, and already turning gray—was completely matted: his whiskers, of a darker colour, were equally ragged and unkempt. He was dressed in a loose drab upper garment that appeared to be a coachman's great-coat with a portion of the skirts cut off. A dirty cotton handkerchief was tied negligently about his neck; and his trousers, of a dingy gray, hung loose as if he wore no braces. His hands were thrust into the pockets on the outer side of the coat, and under one arm he held a short stick, which however might be more aptly denominated a club. From beneath the leathern front of his well-worn cap, his looks were flung hastily around when he emerged from the court, as if his conscience were not altogether so clear as to place his personal freedom beyond the possibility of inconvenient molestation.

Continuing his way, and passing rapidly through several streets—evidently with a settled purpose in view—he at length relaxed his pace near a house in the midst of that maze of lanes, alleys, and courts to which we have already alluded. It was a house that had a small dissenting chapel on one side, and a beer-shop on the other; and it must be observed that next to the chapel there was a narrow alley with a low arched entrance. The house to which we are particularly alluding, and which stood between the chapel and the beer-shop, was a small one—for it was a poor street; but there was nothing in its exterior to detract from its air of humble respectability. A small brass-plate on the front door, indicated that it was occupied by a person named John Smedley, whose calling was that of gold-beater. This was farther illustrated by a gilt arm, the fist clutching a hammer, which appeared over the ground-floor window. That window had green blinds; and if a passer-by peeped over them, he would look into a little parlour that was furnished neatly enough. The two windows of the first floor front had dark moreen curtains: for this floor was let to a lodger. When unoccupied, a neatly written card, conveying the intimation of "Lodgings to let," would be seen in the lower window: but the ticket was not there now, inasmuch as the apartments referred to had a tenant.

Mr. and Mrs. Smedley had the reputation in the neighbourhood of being respectable people enough,—although whispering rumour declared that the wife was somewhat attached to strong waters; but on the other hand, the husband was regular in his attendance at the dissenting chapel next door,—so that the minister regarded him as one of his "choicest and most savoury vessels." He was a man of about eight-and-thirty—with a mean insignificant countenance, in the expression of which it was difficult to find an index of his real character or disposition. A very close observer, if experienced in reading the human heart, would have had some misgivings relative to the sincerity of Mr. Smedley's religious devotion, and might perhaps have caught the glitter of hypocritical cunning underneath the gloss of sanctimoniousness which he habitually wore. His wife was a tall and rather well-made woman, with large features, and a look that indicated decision of character. She had dark hair and eyes, and somewhat a gipsy cast of countenance,—which was enhanced by her olive complexion. She generally wore her hair floating over her shoulders; and though there was a certain bold hardihood in her looks, yet the neighbours were acquainted with nothing prejudicial to her reputation as a wife. She was three or four years younger than her husband, but kept him under the completest control.

The Smedleys had no children: but they had a companion and an assistant in the person of Mrs. Smedley's mother. She was a woman of about sixty, with the same style of features as her daughter, though more angular and prominent with the effects of age; and there was certainly

something sinister, if not actually repulsive, in her looks. She aided her daughter in the household work, and especially attended upon the lodger who occupied the apartments on the first floor. It was rumoured that Mrs. Webber—for that was the old woman's name—possessed some little means of her own; and this opinion appeared to be confirmed from the fact that the Smedleys were tolerably comfortable in their circumstances, and lived in a better style than either the gold-beating avocation or that of letting a portion of their house to a lodger, could possibly warrant. Indeed, John Smedley did not appear to be overburdened with work: for he was often sauntering about the neighbourhood, either for his recreation or else to distribute tracts amongst those whom he denominated his "benighted brethren and sisters." As for Mrs. Smedley and the mother they seldom stirred out of the house, except on a Sunday, when they sometimes accompanied the gold-beater to chapel: but they were not by any means so regular in their attendance as he himself was.

The ill-favoured man whom we introduced at the beginning of this chapter, was named Barnes—but was more familiarly called Barney by his intimates; and sometimes he was spoken of, though never addressed to his face, as Barney the Burker;—it having been suspected that some years previously to the time of which we are writing, he had been connected with the diabolical gang whose wholesale murders produced consternation throughout the country. But as we have just hinted, it was by no means safe to throw out the imputation to Barnes's face: for the savage vindictiveness of his character and his implacable ferocity would have at once prompted him to inflict a terrible chastisement on whomsoever he might regard as giving him offence.

Relaxing his pace, as we have said, when he drew near the gold-beater's house, he flung his looks hastily around,—evidently to assure himself that he was not observed; and then he made a sudden dive under the low arch which led into the alley by the side of the chapel. This alley had an opening at the farther extremity, communicating with a small vacant space behind the chapel, and which was separated by a low wall from the yard at the rear of the Smedleys' house. Over this wall Barney the Burker at once clambered; and alighting in the yard, he without ceremony entered the dwelling by the back door. Though it was dark within, he evidently knew the premises well: for he immediately began to descend a flight of steps—and thus reached an underground place, which being behind the kitchen, might be described as the scullery. Here a light burnt upon a small deal table, at which the Smedleys and Mrs. Webber were seated, with bottles and glasses before them. A massive door on one side communicated with a cellar; and another door led into the front kitchen.

It may possibly be wondered wherefore the Smedleys and the old woman were enjoying themselves on the present occasion in so damp, gloomy, and dungeon-like a place as the scullery, where there was no grate, and consequently no fire—and this too being the cold winter season. But they had business of a particular nature to discuss, and a particular visitor to receive. They did not therefore choose to sit in the parlour, lest passers-by should peep in through the crevices of the shutters, or stand to listen to what was being said; and as there was an iron grating over the front kitchen window, down which anybody might look if lights were burning there, they had similar reasons for avoiding that place. There were certainly other rooms in which they might have met,—such for instance as the back parlour on the ground-floor, which served as John Smedley's workshop when he had any work to do: but then there was the fear of the lodger overhearing anything that was said—and thus was it that the scullery served as the most convenient part of the house for the business that was in hand. What this business was will soon transpire: but the reader has already seen that Barney the Burker was the visitor who was expected.

He made his appearance with the air of one who was no stranger—but on the contrary, was on exceedingly good terms with the gold-beater and the two women. Just nodding familiarly to them all three, he took a seat—dropped his club on one side, and his cap on the other—and then proceeded to help himself to a stiff glass of gin-and-water.

"Well, this *is* a night for blue ruin, hot and strong," he said, grinning so as to display his shark-like teeth, and speaking in a voice that was of habitual hoarseness. "It's uncommon cold—and I wonder you ain't quaking all over with the shivers in this here well of a place."

"You see, my good fellow," replied Smedley, "that it answers very well as a council-room——"

"Come, let's to business," interrupted Mrs. Smedley sharply, as she bent a peremptory look upon her husband to silence him: for he was fond of talking, but she was not fond of listening to him.

"My dear Bab, don't be so fast upon one," rejoined Smedley, in a deprecating manner: and here we may observe that his wife's name was Barbara, for which Bab was used as a diminutive.

"Well, what's in the wind now?" asked the Burker. "I got your message, Jack," he continued, thus addressing Smedley, "which you sent by Tim Scott this arternoon——"

"Ah, Tim Scott is a sharp lad!" interjected the old woman; "and I think he's indebted to you, Barney, for his edication."

"Well, ma'am," replied the Burker, "I certainly have done summut in that way for Tim Scott. But he don't come up to his big brother Bill in artfulness—not by no manner of means. Howsomever, he'll get on in time; and *then* let me tell yer there won't be two such rare fellers in all London as them Scotts—chaps arter my own heart!"

"To be sure," said Mrs. Smedley, with an approving look. "You require such instruments."

"You're right enow there," exclaimed the Burker, with a terrible imprecation. "To get a livin' now-a-days, a man ought to have a dozen hands and arms, and them too always at work: and he ought to have a dozen pair of eyes, to see which way the wind blows——aye, by jingo! and a dozen pair of legs too, to run away from them blue-bottle rascals, or the sneaking detectives, when there's a hue and cry arter him. I tell yer what it is,—them as has the power is making the country one that ain't fit to live in, what with their

new-fangled laws and so on. Why, if I only stand a minute or two in the street, just to take a look at what is going on, up comes a blue-bottle and stares at me fust of all as if there was threats of treadmills in his eyes; and then he bids me move off just as if his tongue had borrowed its tones from the knocker of Newgate. But if I happen to look raythor hard at some swell cove passing along, and chance to foller in the same direction—*then*, by jingo! I'd better cut and run for it; or else up afore the beak—no one to speak to my character—all in wain to say I'm a honest 'ard-working man—but off to the stone jug, and six weeks on the everlasting staircase as a rogue and wagabone."

Mr. Barnes the Burker's language increased in vehemence and bitterness as he thus enumerated his wrongs; and when he had finished, he struck the table so violently with his fist that the bottles, jugs, and glasses appeared as if they were dancing a reel. Then, after a pause—during which the injured man looked slowly round upon his listeners to ascertain the effect which his words had produced—he added doggedly, "And all that's called justice!"

"I'm afraid times have been as bad with you lately," said Mrs. Smedley, "as they have with us. For a matter of ten months we had no lodger——"

"Till this present one come," observed the Burker. "Well, and what do you make out of him?—for I suppose it's about *that* you sent up the message to me to-day by young Tim Scott."

"Right enough, Barney," exclaimed Smedley. "He's a queer file, that old fellow up-stairs——"

"Old indeed!" said Mrs. Webber, who was herself sixty—and therefore she spoke with some degree of indignation: "he is not more than fifty—and I am sure I call that quite young!"

"Nonsense, mother!" interposed Bab Smedley, with her usual sharpness. "Don't waste time about such silly trifles:" then lowering her voice to a mysterious whisper, she said to the Burker, "We mean to do it."

"And right enow too!" he answered; "if so be you've made sure it's worth while."

"Trust us for that," responded Bab. "My mother, though she is so silly in some respects, is precious sharp in others; and she has wormed herself into the lodger's good graces——"

"What's his name again?" inquired Barney.

"Smith," responded Bab: "but of course we knew very well, the moment he came to the house, that it wasn't his right name. He looked so wild and frightened—and seemed glad to be able to hide himself any where; and when I had showed him the lodgings, told him what the price was, and asked for a reference, he said he couldn't give any, but he would pay his rent in advance. And then I asked him his name; and he seemed to hesitate for a minute whether he should call himself Brown, Jones, Thompson, or Smith."

"And he has never once been out since he came here," observed Smedley, taking up the tale: "never once crossed the threshold of the front door."

"And he has been all of a nervous fidget the whole time," said Mrs. Webber. "Ah! and how he has altered too! I shouldn't have thought that a matter of a little more than two months could have made such a change in a human being. But that's why you, Jack," she added, turning to her son-in-law, "call him old. His face is as thin and as pale as a ghost's: he wasn't very fat when he first came—but he has so shrunk away that his clothes hang on him just as if they were never made for him at all."

"But has he got the ready?" demanded Barney: "for that's the principal thing we have got to look at."

"We know he has got *some* money," responded Bab; "and I will tell you how we found it out. It was only the first thing this morning that we discovered it—but we all along suspected that he had a hoard, though he did come without anything but a small carpet-bag——"

"Well, but about the money?" asked the Burker, mixing himself another glass of hot spirits-and-water.

"Why, you see," resumed Bab, "my mother went up as usual this morning to ask him about his dinner; and she gave him his weekly bill to pay. So——"

"Let *me* tell the story, Bab," interrupted the old woman. "You must know, Barney, that he's always in a constant tremble; and every time the door is opened, he looks as frightened as if he expected to see the constables walk in. Well, when I gave him his bill, he put his hand into his pocket; and in his agitation, instead of one purse, he drew out two. Then he got terribly confused, and shoved one of the purses back again—but not before I had time to see that it was well filled with gold at one end—and I rather think, but of course I can't be sure, with bank-notes at the other. He got into conversation, and talked more familiar than he had ever done before,—telling me that he had a deal of trouble on his mind—that he didn't think he should get over it—and then he stopped short, looked very hard at me, and seemed as if he was sorry for letting out so much as he had done. I told him I thought he was ill and wanted the doctor: but I only said *that* just to try and draw him out farther—for I can tell easy enough he *has* something on his mind."

"I shouldn't wonder," observed Barney, "if he has run away from his place of employment, or summut of that sort—perhaps bolted off with the contents of the cash-box. But go on, Mrs. Webber."

"Well," continued the old woman, "Mr. Smith said he didn't want no doctor—he wouldn't see any one—but he thought he should go on the Continent for change of air——"

"He won't, though!" said the Burker, with a look of savage ferocity, "if he has got all that gold in his purse. I'm raythor hard up just at this moment——All my togs, you see, is in Queer Street:"—and he looked slowly down at his coarse sordid apparel.

"Now you know as much of him as we do," remarked Bab Smedley, taking up the thread of the discourse. "So, when mother told us all that—how she had seen the second purse, and how he had hinted about going away—we thought the best thing we could do was to send up to you at once, to tell you to come down this evening and talk over the business. But hark! the up-stairs

bell has just rung. Go, mother, quick—and see what he wants!"

Mrs. Webber accordingly bustled up the flight of steps; and having remained absent for five minutes, she re-appeared in the scullery.

"He has made up his mind to leave," she said, in a mysterious whisper, and with still more ominously mysterious looks. "He says he shall go the day after to-morrow—and he asked if I could get somebody who might be trusted to deliver a letter to-morrow——"

"To be sure!" interjected the Burker, with a significant leer. "You said yes, of course?"

"Of course I did!" responded the old woman, almost indignantly, as if she thought that it was an insult to doubt the nature of the reply she had given. "Who knows but that the letter may be a full confession of all the wrong he has done? Perhaps it will be to the people he has robbed: for that he *has* done something of the sort, there can't be the slightest uncertainty."

"Not a bit of it!" said Bab assentingly. "But under present circumstances, we won't do anything to-night: we will wait till to-morrow night. We will read the letter that he wants to send; and maybe it will put him so much in our power that we may be able to make him give up to us all he has got, and so save us the necessity of——you know what:"—and with a darkly sinister look, she glanced down to that part of the floor where the table stood upon a small square piece of drugget.

"Aye," said the Burker, "that's the best plan. If as how we can get it by fair means, well and good: and if not, *then*——"

And lifting up his club, he shook it in a significant manner, his countenance at the same time becoming so diabolically ferocious that even his accomplices in crime could not prevent themselves from shuddering.

"That place has seen one or two go down," observed Jack Smedley; "and may be it will see another before we are much older."

"Yes—you and me have done a little business together in our time, Jack," responded the Burker, as if the antecedents just alluded to were a subject for satisfactory retrospection. "So, may our friendship never be less!"—and with this sentiment, the ruffian nodded to his three accomplices as he raised the glass to his lips.

Good heavens! that the burning alcohol did not choke the miscreant whose tongue had thus impiously perverted the sacred name of *friendship*, and had made it the illustration of his own horrible ideas of fellowship and intimacy. For it was a frightful friendship, if the word can be so used, which linked him with that man and with those two women—a friendship which held them together for the sake of crimes the darkest and the deepest—a terrible intimacy, that was cemented with blood—a fellowship such as that which may be supposed to prevail in pandemonium! Yet those wretches dared look each other in the face; and if three of them shuddered for an instant at the frightful expression which appeared upon the countenance of the fourth, it was not that they were stricken with remorse for past misdeeds, nor with loathing for their associate—but merely that there was an instinctive recoil from a physical ugliness which the reflex of a blood-stained soul at the instant rendered intolerable for any eyes to gaze upon.

"Ah! it's an uncommon convenient place—isn't it, Barney?" observed Jack Smedley, after a pause which had followed the ruffian's sentiment: and the gold-beater, as he thus spoke, looked down upon the drugget as his wife had previously done. "Now, what things do go on in London! Who would suspect——"

"Don't be so silly, Jack," interrupted Bab. "One would think you were going to moralize on the secrets that this house could reveal if it liked. I am always afraid of your tongue——"

"No—you needn't be afeard," interrupted the Burker. "I've knowed Jack Smedley long enough to be sure that he's as downy as the knocker at Newgate, and as safe and tight as the stone-jug itself. Why, let me see—it's a matter of ten year you've been in this house—and you've kept up a good name the whole time."

"It was my dodge, the joining in with the chaps next door!" observed Smedley, with a triumphant grin expanding over his mean-looking countenance: "and let me tell you it's the very best dodge that ever was. They take me for as snivelling and sanctimonious a fellow as themselves."

"To be sure they do!" ejaculated Barney: "and it's a dodge you must keep up. I thought of taking to it myself—only when I peep in the glass, I can't bring my mind to the belief that my looks is the wery best that's suited for putting on a psalm-singing mug. No—that gammon won't do for me: I must stick to what I am. Besides, I shall make summut of them two Scotts soon. But I'll tell you what's wanted."

"And what's that?" inquired Bab Smedley.

"Just to look on such a business as we may perhaps have here to-morrow night," answered the Burker. "There's no use for chaps like the Scotts to think of launching theirselves regular in the profession till they've seen summut of *that* sort. They've got mischief enow in 'em: but they want hardenin'. I understand it right well enow. I know what human nature is. One must be deep in for it, as the sayin' is, before one is at all times ready to go the whole hog. The feelin's must be blunted. Bless you! it's experience as does it all. Why should we be a sitting here and talking so cool over a little affair of this sort, if we hadn't gone through it all afore? To be sure not!"—and as if to clench the argument, the Burker again struck his fist forcibly upon the table.

"Hush!" said Bab Smedley: "not so loud! The old man up-stairs may hear you."

"I suppose he hasn't no suspicion?" asked Barney.

"Not a bit!" ejaculated Mrs. Webber. "He takes me for a nice, good-natured, comfortable matron that tries to do all she can for him; and he thinks that Jack is everything that all the neighbours think him. As for Bab, he one day said to me that my son-in-law ought to be proud of such a fine handsome wife——"

"And so he ought!" exclaimed Mrs. Smedley, flinging upon her husband a look which was as much as to reproach him for not glorifying himself sufficiently in the possession of his spouse.

"Well," said the Burker, "I think I'll be jog-

ging now; and I'll look down to-morrow night, betwixt nine and ten o'clock, to see what has been done or what *is* to be done."

He rose from his seat—drained his glass—nodded familiarly to his three accomplices—stole gently up the flight of steps—and issued forth into the back yard. Having clambered over the wall again, he passed out of the narrow alley, and betook himself towards his own dwelling. This, as already stated, was in a court leading out of the New Cut, which is a large thoroughfare connecting the Waterloo and Blackfriars Roads. Entering a house in this dark court—the atmosphere of which, although in the winter-time, appeared to breathe infection, feculence, and filth—Barney the Burker ascended to a back-room, where two lads were seated at a table playing a game of dominoes. The room was wretchedly furnished, and had two beds spread upon the floor. One was the couch of the Burker: the other was for the use of the brothers.

Bill Scott, the elder, was a most singular-looking being: his ugliness was sufficiently ludicrous to provoke laughter, were it not that the entire expression of his countenance denoted deep innate villany. He was not above eighteen years of age—and his face seemed that of an old man. It was pale and haggard, and even prematurely wrinkled, with the effects of a career of dissipation commenced early and continuously pursued. The very hair had left all the upper part of his forehead; and where it remained on the rest of the head, it was thin and lanky: being too of a light flaxen colour, it might at the first glance be taken for gray—thus adding to the aged appearance of his countenance. He had large goggle eyes—a little snub nose, very much resembling that of his precious preceptor in the ways of wickedness—immense ears—and a mouth of commensurate proportions. In shape he was almost as thin as a skeleton; and his voice, in its weakness, showed that it had suffered beneath the same attenuating influences which had caused the waste and premature decay of his physical being. His brother Tim was about fifteen—of somewhat stunted growth—short, stout, and thickset. He also had light hair, which was as matted as that of the Burker himself. There was a certain degree of similitude between the brothers, with the exception of that air of old age, haggardness, and ghastly pallor which characterized the elder one. In addition to their game of dominoes, they were recreating themselves with a quart of porter—to which however Bill Scott most frequently paid his addresses.

"So you've come in, have you?" said the Burker, as he entered the room. "And now what luck, boys?"

"Here's a reader, with a flimsy and a quid in it," answered the elder brother, producing a pocket-book containing a five pound note and a sovereign: and his horrible countenance lighted up with pride and satisfaction as if he had performed the noblest of exploits.

"Well, that's good, my lad," exclaimed the Burker, his own hideous features expanding into a grin. "Better than you have done for the last six weeks! Now, Tim, what's your luck?"

"A yack, a blue billy, and a wedge-feeder," responded the younger thief, producing the results of his own day's work, in the shape of a watch, a silk handkerchief (with white spots on a blue ground) and a silver spoon.

"Good again!" cried the Burker. "Things is looking up, and we mus'n't say that trade's been dull or business flat to-day. There's been a good deal doing, seemingly, in the prig's market. So we'll have a jolly good blow out for supper. We'll spend this yaller boy," added the villain, taking up the sovereign; "and to-morrow I'll change the finnip"—meaning the bank-note—"and spout the yack and the feeder. As for the fogle"—thus illustrating the handkerchief—"you two shall play a game of dominoes for it, and the winner shall have it."

Having thus settled matters to his own special satisfaction, and to the perfect contentment of the two lads, the respectable Mr. Barnes sent the younger one forth to purchase a quantity of commodities, eatable and drinkable, for the evening's repast; while he lighted his pipe, therewith to recreate himself until the serving-up of the proposed banquet.

CHAPTER XX.

CHRISTINA AND LORD OCTAVIAN.

It was, as already stated, a sorrowful thing for Christian and Christina to separate from each other: nevertheless there were many circumstances to alleviate the bitterness of the pangs thus felt. Each had obtained an excellent situation; and this good fortune had overtaken them both suddenly, at a period when their circumstances were wearing the most deplorable aspect. Besides, youth is not the time when hearts sink irreclaimably into despondency; and moreover, the twins had the solace of knowing that they should meet frequently, and that in a day or two their first interview after their separation might take place.

Thus, by the time that Christina reached her destination in the cab which bore her thither, her tears were dried, and she had composed herself in order to appear with at least a placid if not a cheerful look in the presence of Lady Octavian Meredith. His lordship was not at home when she arrived: indeed he was out purposely. For the reader may conceive with what astonishment, mingled with trepidation, it was that he learnt on the preceding day how accident had led his wife to engage none other than the beautiful Christina Ashton as her companion! His first impulse had been to start an objection: but a second thought had shown him that he could not. He had already cheerfully given the amiable Zoe permission to have such a companion: he dared not now confess to her everything that had passed in respect to himself, Christina, and the duel;—and without giving some such explanations, it would appear simply whimsical and capricious in him to remonstrate against the special choice which his wife had made. He was therefore constrained to leave matters as they thus stood—but to devise some means for preventing Christina from being taken by surprise through a sudden recognition, and from giving vent to ejaculations that would reveal past incidents to his wife.

BARNES THE BURKER.

Lord Octavian was therefore purposely out when Christina arrived at his mansion in the forenoon. He knew that Zoe had promised to take luncheon with her father that day, between one and two o'clock; and he calculated that she would not on this occasion take Christina with her, but would leave her new friend to settle herself in the chamber allotted to her, and become somewhat acquainted with the habitation which was now her home. Indeed, that Zoe would act thus, Octavian had partially gleaned from a remark which she made at the breakfast-table. Therefore, when Lord Octavian thought that his wife had gone across the Park to her father at the appointed time, he returned to his own dwelling.

Meanwhile Christina had been most cordially welcomed by Zoe, and was at once conducted by the amiable lady to the elegantly furnished apartment which she was to occupy. Zoe at first insisted that one of the maid-servants should unpack Christina's boxes and arrange all her things for her in the wardrobe and drawers: but Miss Ashton was not the being to assume the airs of a fine lady, when conscious of her own dependent position; and Zoe was compelled to let her have her own way in this respect. Christina's conduct enhanced her considerably in the good opinion which Lady Octavian Meredith had already formed of her.

When Miss Ashton had finished her little arrangements in her own chamber, she and Zoe passed an hour or two in agreeable conversation; and shortly after one o'clock the lady said, "I am now going to leave you to amuse yourself until three or four. I have promised to visit my father, who has been much chagrined by the heavy loss he sustained through that same Mr. Preston whose conduct was so distressing to yourself. I shall not therefore propose to take you with me to-day; but on another occasion shall be proud and happy to introduce you to Mr. Armytage."

Zoe set out on her visit; and Christina remained alone in the drawing-room. She practised on the splendid piano-forte; and finding that the instrument was a magnificent one, she derived a species of enthusiastic inspiration from the flow of that harmony which she could thus modulate to grandeur or to pathos beneath her delicate fingers. She sang beautifully, and had a sweet melodious voice: so that having tested the capacities of the instrument, she presently began to accompany herself in some air.

But scarcely had she commenced the song, when Lord Octavian Meredith reached the drawing-room door. Those strains floated on his ears—he recognised Christina's voice—he stopped to listen. Himself passionately fond of music, it was with a growing rapture that he thus drank in those delicious sounds, in which the most exquisite vocal and instrumental harmonies were blended. His rapture amounted almost to an ecstacy: his pulses thrilled with delight: it appeared as if he had been suddenly borne to the very threshold of Elysium itself. Noiselessly he turned the handle of the door: as gently and cautiously did he open it; and as he looked in, he beheld Christina seated at the piano, her back towards him. She, totally unconscious of his presence—totally unsuspicious of the opening of the door—continued her music and her delicious warbling, all the ecstatic effects of which were enhanced in Lord Octavian's estimation, now that he was enabled to contemplate her sylphid figure as she was seated there. Her raven tresses were floating over her shoulders: every now and then he caught a vanishing glimpse of her faultless Grecian profile;—every gesture and movement on her part seemed characterized by grace and elegance; and fairer than the piano's ivory keys themselves, were the delicate hands that passed over them. Now did those sweetly tapered fingers appear to skip as it were with almost lightning celerity from note to note: now they rested for a few seconds on some particular keys—while the voice of song continued to blend in ravishing harmony with the music which those fingers made. And that shape too—how beautifully modelled was it! Even if he had never seen her countenance before, Meredith could have staked his existence that the loveliest face must belong to so charming a figure. The song ceased—the last sounds of the music were vibrating tremulously through the apartment as Octavian closed the door, and Christina started up from her seat.

"Mr. Percival," she exclaimed, her first feeling being one of grateful joy, though mingled with surprise thus to encounter the chivalrous individual who had perilled his life in a duel for her sake.

Octavian advanced—took her hand—and as he pressed it warmly, the rapture of his feelings continued to permeate the looks with which he gazed upon Christina. There was nothing insolent in those regards—no libertine effrontery to shock her pure mind—but nevertheless a degree of fervid admiration which she could not possibly help observing, and which made her withdraw her hand somewhat abruptly as the colour mounted to her cheeks and her eyes were cast down.

"Miss Ashton," said Octavian, "you have delighted me with your musical skill—but may I add, still more with the exquisite beauty of your voice?"

This compliment, delivered in tones that were almost as impassioned as Octavian's looks, completed Christina's confusion: the crimson deepened on her cheeks—and her sweet black eyes, which she had for a moment raised again, were as rapidly bent down once more.

"I hope that I have not offended you," said Octavian, in a soft voice: "not for worlds would I do so!"

"Oh, I believe you, sir!" exclaimed Christina with artless warmth: for it immediately struck her that the man who had rescued her from insult, and had risked his life as the consequence, could not possibly mean himself to insult her. "But frankly speaking," she added, now looking at him with the full ingenuousness of her large clear dark eyes—and she smiled modestly too as she thus spoke, revealing teeth white as oriental pearls,—"I am so little accustomed to be complimented that perhaps I betray too much awkward embarrassment——"

"No—not too much!" ejaculated Octavian: and it was on the very tip of his tongue to add, "I adore you as you are! your very innocence is the greatest of all your charms!"—but with a sudden effort he held the words back; and taking her hand, conducted her to a seat.

"Neither Lord nor Lady Octavian Meredith are

at home," said Christina, little thinking that she was addressing one of those of whom she spoke. "Her ladyship will not return for two hours——"

"But Lord Octavian himself is in the house," observed Meredith.

"I will ring and inquire," said Christina: and she was rising from her seat, when the expression of Meredith's countenance struck her as so peculiar that she stopped short.

"No—Miss Ashton," he said, "you need not make any such inquiry. Pardon me for a little deceit which was practised on you—forgive me—listen to me——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Christina, with a faint shriek: but instantaneously recovering herself, she said somewhat coldly, "*You*, then, are Lord Octavian Meredith?"

"I am," he responded. "Pray resume your seat—and suffer me to give you those explanations which are requisite."

Christina hesitated. There was in her mind a vague sense of impropriety in remaining alone with the young nobleman who had deceived her; and yet she felt that it was a duty both to herself and to him to listen to whatsoever he might have to say. She accordingly sat down again—but spoke not a word; and her look was still cold, but with a certain tremulousness in it.

"You will remember, Miss Ashton," proceeded Meredith, speaking in the most respectful tone, and with a corresponding look—for he felt that he had an exceedingly difficult part to perform,—"you will remember that on the day I had the satisfaction of rendering you a trifling service, I penetrated your motives in asking my name. You saw that a duel was probable—nay, more, that it was inevitable; and with the most generous of purposes you intended to give information to a magistrate. But my honour was at stake; and I was bound to meet that antagonist whom circumstances had suddenly raised up. Therefore, to prevent your generous intentions from being carried out, I gave a false name——"

"True!" murmured Christina, as all the circumstances flashed vividly back to her mind.

"That duel," continued Meredith, "took place, as you are aware: but as no injury was the result, it was so completely hushed up that it never reached Lady Octavian's ears. I trust to your generosity that it shall continue a secret in respect to her. But to continue my explanations. I promised you, Miss Ashton, that you should be made acquainted with the result of that duel—that if I fell, my second should wait upon you with the intelligence—but that if I escaped unhurt, I would personally call to convince you of my safety. I did call—I sent up the name by which you already knew me: it was however my intention to reveal myself fully to your knowledge. But when I beheld the simple tastes and pursuits of your brother and yourself—pardon me for thus speaking—I thought that the frank and affable manner in which I was received, and the friendly feeling which your brother specially exhibited towards me, might receive a check if I proclaimed myself to be of titled rank. In my estimation that rank is nothing: but I know full well that as the world goes, as society is constituted, and as prejudices have their influence, an aristocratic name has a certain *prestige*——In a word, I saw enough of you both to wish to become your friend; and I feared that as Lord Octavian Meredith I might not experience the same frank and open-hearted reception which was already given to Mr. Percival."

Meredith ceased: but Christina did not immediately answer him. As a matter of course the explanation was entirely satisfactory up to the point where it treated of the visit to the lodgings after the duel: but from that point to the end it was less satisfactory. Miss Ashton was too artless, ingenuous, and unsophisticated herself, to penetrate the subtleties of the human soul: but on the other hand, she was too intelligent and right-minded not to entertain a certain misgiving as to the young nobleman's complete self-exculpation. A vague idea that the latter portion of his speech had some sophistry in it, floated in her imagination: but yet she could scarcely explain the feeling to herself—from the simple reason that she could not possibly suppose Meredith to have been smitten with her beauty.

"My lord," she at length said, speaking gravely and seriously, "I thank you for the explanations which you have given me: but I do not see how it is possible for me to withhold from her ladyship the circumstance that we have met before."

"You have not as yet uttered a word to Zoe about that duel?" inquired Octavian hastily. "I know you did not yesterday—but to-day?"

"I have never spoken of it to a soul except my brother," responded Christina. "But I really cannot comprehend, my lord, wherefore you should object to her ladyship becoming acquainted with a generous deed which you performed. The danger, thank heaven! has long been over——"

"Miss Ashton," interrupted Meredith, "your own good sense will tell you that it can be no welcome intelligence for a wife to learn that her husband has for more than two months treasured up a secret from her. Proclaim the truth, if you will, to Zoe—but pardon me for saying that you will be guilty of an act of unkindness towards myself, inasmuch as my wife would never put confidence in me again. If I happened to rise at an earlier hour than usual in the morning—or if I were detained out later than is my wont at night—she would torture herself with all possible anxieties—she would picture to herself her husband involved in some cruel dilemma the imminence of which he had carefully concealed from her——"

"Yes, my lord," interrupted Christina; "all that you say is but too true. Nevertheless, I feel that I cannot be guilty of a deception towards an amiable lady who has received me in the kindest manner——No, I cannot! I will say nothing of past events: but I will withdraw from the house at once. Yes—whatsoever construction may be put on this step——"

"Miss Ashton," exclaimed Octavian Meredith, "I would rather ten thousand times that you should tell Zoe everything! What could she possibly think if you withdrew yourself thus abruptly? She would either imagine that you had received some insult from me, and were too generous to mention it; or on the other hand that you were conscious of some unworthiness of your own which you were afraid of transpiring. Against the former suspicion how could I possibly vindicate myself when all appearances would be in my dis-

favour?—and as for the latter suspicion, sooner than that *you* should suffer one tittle in the estimation of Zoe, I would proclaim everything!"

Christina beheld all the truth and none of the sophistry—for there was a blending of both—contained in these arguments. She was bewildered how to act. Not for the world would she bring mischief into a house the lady of which had received her with open arms!—but on the other hand she could not bear the idea of harbouring a secret which to her pure mind savoured so much of a deception.

"Now, Miss Ashton, you must decide upon the course which you intend to pursue," resumed Lord Octavian: and it was with the greatest difficulty he could conceal the anxiety and suspense which he experienced. "There are but two alternatives for your choice: the one is that her ladyship shall be made acquainted with everything, and her confidence in me be thereby destroyed—or that she shall remain in total ignorance of the past, and her happiness continue undisturbed."

"If those be the alternatives, my lord," responded Christina, "I cannot for another moment hesitate between them. It shall be as you wish."

"Thank you, Miss Ashton," answered Meredith: but he was now so completely on his guard that he did not suffer his looks to betray the joy that he felt at the decision to which the beautiful Christina had just come: nor did he speak in tones, nor bend such looks upon her, which might again cover her with confusion, and perhaps engender in her mind a suspicion of the love with which she had inspired him, but of the existence of which she was as yet evidently altogether ignorant.

Scarcely was this understanding arrived at—and just as Christina was about to rise from her seat and retire to her own apartment—the door was thrown open, and the footman announced the Duke of Marchmont.

"My dear Meredith," said his Grace, advancing into the room with a well-bred air of easy familiarity; "it is an age since we met!"

His quick eye had at once caught sight of Christina: at once too had he recognised in her the sister of his young secretary, by the similitude existing between them: but he preserved the completest control over his looks—at first affecting not to perceive her at all, and then bowing with the air of a man who has nothing peculiar in his mind when in the presence of some one whom he sees for the first time.

"Permit me, my lord," said Meredith, "to introduce you to Miss Ashton—a friend of Lady Octavian's."

"Delighted to have the honour of Miss Ashton's acquaintance," said the Duke, again bowing: and then for the first time appearing to be struck by anything in reference to her, he ejaculated, "Dear me, how strange! I have a young gentleman with me, bearing the same name; and——pardon the observation——but the resemblance is so striking!"

"And no wonder, my lord," exclaimed Meredith, with a good-humoured air; "for the young gentleman to whom you allude, is this young lady's brother."

"I am more than ever glad to form Miss Ashton's acquaintance," said the Duke, with another courteous bow: "for I have taken a very great fancy to young Mr. Ashton—and I am sure that he and I shall be excellent friends. We have not had above a dozen words of conversation this morning—indeed he has only been a few hours at Marchmont House—and therefore I had no opportunity of learning from his lips that his sister was here. The pleasure of meeting Miss Ashton is therefore all the greater, on account of being so completely unexpected."

The Duke of Marchmont had been telling a great falsehood. He had learnt from Christian where his sister was now located; and in his anxiety to behold that being who he felt persuaded was Octavian's "fair unknown" of some little time past, he had paid the present visit. He did not remain above a quarter of an hour; and neither by look nor word did he suffer Octavian to perceive that he had fathomed the secret, and that in Christina he felt convinced he *did* behold that fair unknown. As for Miss Ashton herself, she was about to leave the room at the expiration of a few minutes: but both Meredith and Marchmont assured her that they had no private business to converse upon; and for courtesy's sake she was compelled to remain. When however the Duke had taken his leave, she at once ascended to her own chamber,—where she tarried until Lady Octavian returned from her father's house. Then she re-appeared in the drawing-room; and to her great relief found that Meredith was not there. He did not re-enter the dwelling until a quarter of an hour before dinner-time, when Zoe was in her own chamber, preparing her evening toilet. Christina had therefore ample leisure to throw off any embarrassment which Lord Octavian's presence occasioned her, before Zoe joined them in the drawing-room; and her ladyship saw nothing in the countenance of either to lead her to suspect that they had met before this day.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHRISTIAN'S FIRST DAY AT MARCHMONT HOUSE.

HAVING thus seen Christina Ashton installed in the situation which she had accepted, let us follow her brother to the mansion of the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont. On arriving there, he was requested by a footman to follow him to the housekeeper's room; and in a few minutes he was introduced to that important female functionary.

We may here as well observe that the steward and housekeeper were husband and wife, and that their name was Calvert. They were an elderly couple,—Mr. Calvert of spare figure, sedate countenance, and remarkable precision both of speech and manners—his wife a stout, matronly, comfortable-looking dame, always exceedingly neat in her apparel, and priding herself highly on the regularity and good discipline which her husband and herself maintained in the domestic department of the household. They were excessively strict—but at the same time straightforward and right-principled. They exercised no overbearing despotism themselves, and allowed no petty tyrannies to be practised by the superior servants towards the

inferior ones. They had their own parlour, where they usually took their meals together: but of a Sunday they generally invited the butler, the lady's-maids, and one or two of the upper servants —such as his Grace's valets—to feast at their dining-table.

It was to this comfortable little parlour that Christian Ashton was conducted by the gorgeously dressed footman; and there he found Mr. and Mrs. Calvert seated together. Both were looking over accounts; and in front of each was a goodly pile of money in bank-notes, gold, and silver. When the footman announced Mr. Ashton, they both desisted from their occupation, and rose to receive the young gentleman. The steward bowed primly—the housekeeper proffered the youth her hand: he was invited to sit down—and then did the explanations commence in respect to the arrangements which had been made for his comfort at Marchmont House.

"I have ordered a nice cheerful little bedchamber to be prepared for you," said Mrs. Calvert; "and I will show you to it presently. His Grace has suggested, if you have no objection, that you should take your meals with us——"

"And *we* have no objection," interposed Mr. Calvert, in a half-patronising manner, which was nevertheless both kind and respectful: "for you appear to be a young gentleman whose company will be agreeable to us."

"And I am sure," resumed Mrs. Calvert, "we will do all we can to render you comfortable. One thing we must beg to observe—which is that we are very regular in our meals: breakfast at nine—dinner at two—tea at six—and supper at nine. But of course, if at any time you wish for refreshment, you have only to signify such a desire, and it shall be instantaneously complied with."

"While thanking you for your assurances of making me comfortable," answered Christian, "I can safely promise that I shall conform to your regulations."

"His Grace desired me to tell you," said the steward, after a brief pause, "that you are welcome to use the library as much as you think fit when his Grace is elsewhere; and on those occasions when it suits his lordship to be alone there, you can make our parlour your sitting-room. Or there is a little cabinet near the library, which Mrs. Calvert will show you presently, where you are welcome to sit when you choose to be alone——In short, I have not the slightest doubt you will soon fall into the regular routine of the household, and that you will speedily find yourself at home."

Christian again expressed his thanks for the kind assurances thus given him, and the forethought which had dictated all those suggestions for his comfort and well-being.

"And now," said Mrs. Calvert, "would you like a piece of cake and a glass of wine?—or a *leetle* drop of cherry-brandy? for the weather is uncommonly cold:"—and as the worthy matron thus spoke, she repaired to a cupboard of considerable dimensions, and the shelves of which were crowded with pots of preserves, cakes, biscuits, bottles of wine, spirits, and liqueurs—and all those little luxuries which are invariably to be found in a housekeeper's room in a wealthy mansion.

Christian however declined the proffered refreshment,—for it was still early in the forenoon; and moreover his heart was full at being separated from his beloved sister.

"Well then, Mr. Ashton," said the dame, "let me show you at once to your quarters; and when you have arranged the contents of your boxes, you can report your arrival to the Duke."

Mrs. Calvert accordingly conducted the young secretary up a back staircase, to a chamber which though on one of the upper storeys, was nevertheless a most comfortable little apartment,—looking upon a small garden that there was at the back of the mansion. She then led him along a corridor—down the upper flights of the principal staircase—as far as the first floor; and there she showed him the entrance to the picture-gallery, assuring him that he was perfectly welcome to lounge in there and amuse himself whensoever he might think fit. Decending thence into the entrance-hall, Mrs. Calvert conducted Christian to the library, which was on the ground-floor, and the windows of which looked upon the garden. It was a spacious apartment,—containing handsome mahogany cases, the shelves of which were crowded with elegantly-bound volumes, all protected by glass-doors. By the side of the library was a little parlour—a narrow slip indeed—with one window, also looking on the garden; and this was denominated the cabinet, the free use of which was placed at Christian's disposal.

Having thus far initiated him into the geography of the mansion, Mrs. Calvert returned to her own sitting-room—while Christian ascended to his chamber to unpack his boxes and arrange his clothes in the drawers. He then made himself look as neat as possible; and descending to the entrance-hall, requested a footman to announce his arrival to the Duke. In a few minutes Christian was desired to attend his Grace in the library; and thither he accordingly repaired.

"Well," said Marchmont, with a half-smile, "so you made up your mind to come and live in the house?"

"Your Grace was kind enough to leave me to my own choice in the matter," replied the youth; "and having consulted with my sister, I called yesterday afternoon——"

"Yes, yes—your message was delivered to me," said the Duke: "you intimated your intention to come and take up your abode here to-day—and you have doubtless already found that arrangements have been made to insure your comfort?"

"For which I sincerely thank your Grace," rejoined Christian.

"Nothing to thank me for," said Marchmont carelessly: then, after a pause—during which he had motioned Christian to take a seat,—he observed, as if still in the same careless, indifferent manner, "And what is your sister going to do? Coming to live in the neighbourhood, I suppose, so that you may see each other often?"

"No, my lord," replied Christian: "fortunately my sister obtained a situation at the very same hour yesterday forenoon that I was so happy as to satisfy your Grace's requirements."

"Ah, indeed—a situation?" said Marchmont. "And what is it?"

"Companion, my lord, to a lady living in the Regent's Park."

"An elderly lady, I presume? Perhaps a widow—or an old maid?"

"No, my lord," responded Christian, flattering himself, in the ingenuousness of his mind, that the Duke was demonstrating considerable interest—and that of a very kind nature too—in the affairs of himself and his sister. "Christina has become the companion of a young lady——Lady Octavian Meredith."

The Duke could scarcely repress a start at this announcement: for being convinced in his own mind that Christian's sister *was* Lord Octavian's fair unknown, it at once struck him that Octavian himself had manœuvred in some way or another to get the young girl beneath his own roof. He even suspected for an instant that there must already be some sort of an understanding between Christian's sister and Octavian Meredith,—an understanding which the young lady had perhaps kept altogether unknown from her artless-minded brother: for it needed but a glance on the part of such a thorough man of the world as the Duke of Marchmont, to discern how really unsophisticated his young secretary was.

"And pray," he inquired, "how was your sister fortunate enough to obtain that situation?"

"Through the recommendation of the landlady with whom we lived, my lord, and whose daughter is in service at Lady Octavian Meredith's."

The Duke of Marchmont now felt more and more assured that it was all a concocted arrangement on Meredith's part to get Miss Ashton into his house—and that the landlady just alluded to, had lent herself to the scheme, even if Christina herself had not.

"Cunning dog, that Octavian!" he thought to himself; "but perhaps I will outwit him yet." And then he said, speaking aloud, "I am well acquainted with Lord Octavian Meredith——Ah, by the bye, now I bethink me, it was on account of a Miss Ashton that he fought a duel some little time back—and I was his second on the occasion."

"Lord Octavian Meredith!" ejaculated Christian, opening wide his fine dark eyes in bewildered astonishment at this intelligence. "No, my lord—there is some mistake—it was a Mr. Percival."

"Cunning dog, that Octavian!" again thought the Duke to himself: for it immediately struck him that the young nobleman had concealed his aristocratic rank under a feigned name, and perhaps represented himself as an unmarried man, the better to carry on a love siege against the heart of the beautiful Christina. Then again speaking aloud, Marchmont said, "I am afraid I have let out a secret: for it assuredly *was* Lord Octavian Meredith who fought on your sister's behalf. About twenty-two or twenty-three years of age—very good-looking—slender shape—brown hair and moustache——"

"The same, my lord!" cried Christan, more and more bewildered.

"Don't look so astonished," said the Duke, smiling: "it is perfectly intelligible that Lord Octavian should have taken a feigned name—— By the bye, I recollect that he told me so, and that his reason was the fear that your sister would go and take steps to prevent the duel. But I suppose he called upon you afterwards?"

"Once, my lord—and only once," responded Christian.

"And you were present?"

"The whole time. He only remained a short while; and that very same evening we removed to other lodgings. We never saw Lord Octavian again. What a singular coincidence that my sister should have obtained a situation with his lordship's wife!"

"Very singular," observed the Duke, convinced that the lad was speaking in the genuine sincerity of his unsophisticated heart.

A little more conversation took place; and by means of farther questioning—but all conducted in such a way as to prevent Christian from suspecting that the Duke had any ulterior object in view—his Grace obtained a sufficient insight into the character of Christina and the recent mode of life of the twins, as to bring him to the conclusion that Miss Ashton was really a most virtuous and well-conducted girl, and that it was through no secret understanding on her own part that she had entered Lord Octavian's household. On the contrary, Marchmont felt convinced that up to the very moment of her proceeding thither, she had no idea of the identity of Lord Octavian and Mr. Percival.

"Should you happen to fall in with Lord Octavian," said the Duke, "you had better not tell him that it was from my lips you learnt the little secret that the name of Percival was an assumed one. Of course your sister will tell you—and you need not appear to have known it in any other way."

"Certainly, my lord—your advice shall be followed," answered Christian, who saw no harm and suspected no evil in all these things.

"We have no letters to write to-day," remarked the Duke presently: "and therefore you may amuse yourself in becoming better acquainted with your new home."

With these words, the Duke rose and sauntered out of the library,—fully determined to call in the course of the afternoon at Lord Octavian Meredith's, and obtain a glimpse, if possible, of the beautiful Miss Ashton. That this design was carried into effect the reader has already seen; and the result of the interview was that the Duke of Marchmont felt himself as much enamoured of the charming girl as such a dissipated individual could possibly be.

While ascending to his own chamber in the course of the afternoon, Christian encountered on the stairs a beautiful lady, attended by a maid, and whom he at once conceived to be the Duchess. She was in her thirty-second year—tall—finely formed—and with lustrous masses of auburn hair floating over her shoulders. There was something more than beautiful in her countenance,—a touching pensiveness bordering upon melancholy, which rendered her eminently interesting; and as Christian stood respectfully aside to make way for her, and bowed courteously as he did so, she stopped and spoke.

"Are you the young gentleman," she inquired, in a soft musical voice, and with her benignant look, "whom his Grace has engaged as his private secretary?"

Christian bowed again, and replied in the affirmative.

"I hope you will be happy and comfortable at Marchmont House," proceeded her ladyship: and

then, with an ill-subdued sigh, she continued her way down the stairs.

In the evening, after supper—as Christian was amusing himself in the library, looking at some of the elegantly bound books, and making notes of the titles of those which he thought he should like to peruse at his leisure—he happened to take down a volume from between the leaves of which a piece of paper fell upon the carpet. He picked it up, and found that it was a column cut out of an old newspaper. It was dingy with age, though the print was perfectly legible; and the date at the top showed him that the journal of which it had once formed a part, belonged to a period of more than eighteen years back. Christian was about to return the slip to the book from which it had fallen, when his eye caught the name of Marchmont; and a closer scrutiny showed him that it was a report of a Coroner's inquest upon the body of a murdered Duke bearing that title. Naturally interested in the circumstance, from being in the service of the present Duke, Christian sat down to read the account; and thus for the first time did he become acquainted with some of those facts which have been related in the earlier chapters of our narrative. He thereby discovered that the present Duke of Marchmont had succeeded to the title of his murdered uncle—that the murder itself had been brought home by unquestionable evidence to the existing Duke's brother, the Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian—and that there was an equal amount of evidence to prove a criminal intercourse between Bertram Vivian and the wife of the murdered Duke. The young lad shuddered as he read the catalogue of iniquities thus circumstantially narrated.

Replacing the newspaper-fragment between the leaves of the book, and returning the book to the shelf, Christian sat down to ponder over all he had just read. He thought to himself what a kind-hearted man the present Duke must be to have endeavoured to shield his brother from the dreadful imputation which rested against him at the time: for that Hugh *had* made such endeavour, was duly recorded in the proceedings of the inquest. While Christian was thus giving way to his reflections—wondering too what had ultimately become of Bertram and Eliza—an imperceptible drowsiness stole over him,—a drowsiness which blended as it were with his reverie, imparting a dreaminess to the tenour of his thoughts. If he had been reading at the time, he would no doubt have endeavoured to shake it off: but as he was reclining back in a cushioned arm-chair, with no occupation for his eyes—but on the contrary, his outward vision being turned inwardly, so to speak, in the contemplation of the incidents of the past—he made no attempt to struggle against that insidiously stealing drowsiness. It deepened—and in a few minutes the youth was wrapped in profound slumber. That sleep should thus have come over him, was scarcely to be wondered at; for on the previous day as well as on that of which we are writing, he had undergone considerable excitement of the mind on account of the change which had taken place in the condition of his sister and himself. However, be the cause whatsoever it might, Christian slumbered in that large arm-chair; and this occurred a little after ten o'clock in the evening.

How long he slept, he could not immediately tell: but he gradually wakened up to the knowledge that the place was involved in pitchy darkness, and that voices were speaking there. His first sensation was one of physical cold, blended with mental alarm. Lamp and fire had both gone out—hence the chill which he naturally experienced in his limbs; and his alarm was occasioned by the fact that he could not immediately recollect where he was. This dimness and bewilderment of the mind's perception was however transient; and at the very instant that he remembered how he had fallen asleep in the Duke of Marchmont's library, he recognised the voice of the Duke himself.

"What nonsense! Are you afraid to be in the dark? I tell you there is no one here. It is impossible. Why, man, it is past midnight, and all the household are in bed, except the hall-porter who let us in, and my valet, whom, as you heard, I ordered to retire at once. We have but a few words to say, and may as well say them here as anywhere else."

"Afraid, my lord?" said the other voice, and which was totally unfamiliar to Christian's ears. "What can I be afraid of? But your Grace will confess that it is a somewhat strange proceeding to drag a man almost by force into a dark room—shut the door—and then tell him that it is on a most important business——"

The Duke of Marchmont interrupted the speaker with a loud laugh, exclaiming, "Why, my dear Stanhope, a man who was brave enough to go out and fight a duel, cannot care for being a little while in the dark!"

"And I tell your Grace that I do *not*," replied the individual, who, it appeared, was Mr. Stanhope. "But still——"

"But still—but still—you do not much relish it?" continued the Duke, laughing: and yet there was something curiously unnatural and forced in that laugh of his.

"You opened another door," said Mr. Stanhope, "ere you brought me in hither? Pray speak seriously——"

"Well, I will," rejoined the Duke. "Now the fact is, my dear fellow, the door that I opened first of all, was that of a little cabinet where the servants are accustomed to leave a light, together with wine, and spirits, and so forth, when I come in very late at night: but as you yourself saw, there was no light there. Sometimes the light and the refreshments are placed here, in the library; and that was the reason I led you from one door to another. But however, there is no light here any more than there is in the cabinet: and as we *are* here, we may as well talk. Candidly speaking, I have something important to say, and don't want to go up into the drawing-room, because that valet of mine may not have retired to bed as yet; and I would not have him overhear our discourse."

"But may it not be also possible, my lord," inquired Stanhope, "that we shall be overheard here?"

"No: for the inner green-baize door hermetically seals the entrance against eaves-droppers. Now, Stanhope, are you prepared to hear me?"

"I am, my lord. Go on."

"You have this night lost twelve thousand pounds to me at the gaming-table," continued the

Duke of Marchmont, speaking with a certain tone of resoluteness, as if he felt himself to be in the position of one who could dictate and command.

"And I have frankly told your Grace," replied Stanhope, "that I have not twelve thousand shillings at this present moment."

"True," remarked the Duke curtly. "You admit therefore that you are in my power?"

"So completely in your Grace's power, that if you expose me to the world, I have no alternative but to place the muzzle of a pistol in my mouth and pull the trigger valiantly—or else take a drop of prussic acid and yield up my life as if it were a lightning-flash passing out of me:"—and it was in a singular but horrible tone of mingled irony and desperation that the Hon. Mr. Stanhope thus spoke.

"I have given you to understand," replied the Duke, "that to neither of these agreeable alternatives need you have recourse, provided——"

"Ah,—provided!" ejaculated Stanhope. "Then there is a condition——a condition beyond the mere one of giving your Grace some security for eventual payment? But, my lord, is it possible that this condition is of such a character that you dare not look me in the face while explaining it—and that for this reason you have brought me into a room where the darkness is as deep as that of the grave?"

"Would you have me give you credit for being over nice and particular?" asked the Duke, in a somewhat sneering tone. "Now look you, Mr. Stanhope—you and I have not known each other for much more than a couple of months or so—ten weeks at the very outside. It was the duel which first rendered us acquainted——"

"It was, my lord. Go on."

"During these ten weeks—if indeed our acquaintance has been so long—I have seen quite enough of you, and have learnt perhaps still more——"

"I can anticipate what your Grace would say," interrupted Stanhope coldly, yet somewhat bitterly. "You know that I am a gambler, and that already an almost princely fortune has gone into the hands of a set of harpies——Maledictions upon them!—the bare thought of it is enough to make a man forswear cards and dice for evermore. You know too that I am dissipated—fond of pleasure—having a certain position in society which it were death to lose—having also a certain appearance to keep up, to fail in which were to carry me at once to the necessity of suicide. Well, my lord, all these things you know; and what is more still, you feel that my cursed ill luck of the last three hours has left me entirely at your mercy. Judging of my habits, and taking my desperate condition into account, you regard me as a suitable instrument for some purpose you have in hand. Is it not so?"

"It is," responded the Duke of Marchmont.

"Then your lordship might have said so at first, without any unnecessary circumlocution; and you might likewise say so within the sphere of a lamp's light and over a glass of wine."

"Not so!" rejoined the Duke. "As we are here in the dark, so will we remain until our conference be ended. As for the wine, it all depends upon the understanding to which we come, whether we adjourn to the dining-room and empty a decanter ere we part——"

"It may be as well if I inform your Grace at once that I am *not* exceedingly particular in what I do to save myself from ruin. A man," continued Mr. Stanhope, "who has found himself compelled to contemplate suicide, and to talk of it, is not likely to stick at a trifle or two if it will enable him to *live*. To live—yes! but in his usual manner, I mean—with gold at his command—the means of pleasure at his bidding——"

"And all these shall be within your reach!" interrupted Marchmont. "Now look you, my dear fellow,—for circumstances are rendering you and me closely intimate. Indeed, I wish you to become intimate with me—I wish you to call at the house every day—to dine with me three or four times a week; and for that purpose I will dine at home on the occasions when you are coming. I wish you to call in the afternoon and lounge in the drawing-room in conversation with the Duchess—I wish you to pay your court to her—to make yourself agreeable to her Grace—to pass round to her box when she is at the theatre or at the Opera——"

"And what in the devil's name," cried Stanhope, with accents of unfeigned amazement, "does your Grace purpose by all this?"

"You owe me twelve thousand pounds, which you cannot pay," responded the Duke: "and I have no doubt that it would be an agreeable thing if this twelve thousand pounds were not merely forgiven you, but that a like sum were handed over to you as a testimonial of my esteem——all private, secret, and confidential, you know, and entirely between ourselves."

"It must be a tremendous service which your Grace demands for such a colossal reward:"—and Stanhope spoke gravely and seriously.

"It *is* an immense service which you will be rendering me," replied the Duke,—"but one which *you* can perform with few scruples of conscience; while on the other hand there is great *eclat* to be obtained thereby."

"I am as completely in the dark with respect to your Grace's meaning," said Mr. Stanhope, "as I am in the place where we are now talking. Can you not come to the point? Frankly speaking, I infinitely dislike this roundabout manner which your Grace is adopting——"

"Then, in a few words," interrupted the Duke, "I will explain myself. You are to become intimate with me—you are to pay your court, as I have already said, to the Duchess—you will be a constant visitor here—you will literally besiege her Grace. Then the world will begin to talk: no matter! I shall see nothing that is going on; and if the world choose to consider me blind, be it so. But at length I shall awaken all of a sudden—something will occur to fill me with suspicion——an intercepted letter, for instance—a letter, you comprehend, from yourself to her Grace—in which you will speak of the love subsisting between you—— Aye, and you will even go farther—you will leave no doubt as to the criminal nature of that love——"

"But suppose that nothing of all this does really take place," interrupted Stanhope: "suppose that her Grace conceives a hatred for me?"

"And very likely she will," observed the Duke coolly: "but what has that got to do with your

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incessant visits, and with the letter which in a few months' time you will write and which you will take care that I shall intercept? May I not play the part of a dishonoured and outraged husband? will not you stand the brunt of an action for crim. con., when you know perfectly well that I shall never call upon you to pay such damages as may be awarded? and may I not, upon such foundation as the jury's verdict affords, sue for a divorce against a woman whom I hate and detest? May not, I ask, all these things take place?—and if you get as good as twenty-four thousand pounds for rendering me this service, will not you be a gainer as well as I? Besides, only think of the honour and credit of having the reputation of intriguing with a Duchess! Why, my good fellow, it will make your fortune in more ways than one—it will be to you better than all that fortune which you have lost at the gambling-table. The whole fashionable world will at once vote you their lion—their star—their phœnix—their cynosure. The men will burst with envy and with jealousy, when with a half-smile upon your countenance you stroll jauntily into the brilliant saloons of patrician mansions: the ladies will tap you with their fans and call you the naughty creature——"

"A truce to this bantering!" interrupted Stanhope sharply—almost sternly. "It is true that I am in your Grace's power; but I am not for that reason to be rendered your laughing-stock. It is impossible that you can mean what you say!"

"I never was more serious in my life," answered the Duke of Marchmont.

"By Heaven, my lord! it is a matter wherein I cannot give you credit for the seriousness you speak of, unless you prove it. How know I but that it is some snare, though incomprehensible—some pitfall, though unaccountable—wherein you seek to entrap me? And this dark room too——"

"Perdition take your constant recurrence to the darkness of the room!" interrupted the Duke impatiently. "You demand proof?—it is difficult to give. And yet in many circumstances may you recognise such proof. For upwards of fifteen years have I been married to Lavinia—and she has given me no heir. Think you that I, bearing one of the proudest titles in all Christendom—and that title, too, associated with immense wealth,—think you, I ask, that I do not yearn to possess an heir to my distinctions and to my riches? The estates are strictly entailed: think you therefore that it is a pleasurable thing for me to reflect that at my death some far-removed relative, some remote connexion whose very existence is at present unknown to me—may spring up—possibly from amidst the dregs of society—for the highest families may be found to have connexions, though very distant ones, in the lowest sphere——think you, I ask, that it is agreeable for me to reflect that some such dirty claimant may arise when I am gone and prove his right to the coronet which I wear, the estates over which I now lord it, and the mansions which my taste has embellished? Now, Stanhope, have I given proofs of my sincerity in seeking a divorce from her who presents me with no heir?"

There was a profound silence in the library for upwards of a minute,—at the expiration of which Mr. Stanhope slowly said, "Yes—I now believe your Grace to be sincere."

"Oh, it is well that I have succeeded in convincing you at last," observed the Duke.

"I believe you sincere in wishing for an heir," continued Stanhope: "but in the extreme measure which your Grace proposes——"

"That regards *me*," interrupted the Duke. "It is for *you* to consider whether you will enter into my project, and carry it out in the way that I have suggested—or with such variations as circumstances may render advisable, always keeping the one grand aim in view."

"I will!" answered Stanhope. "Yes—my necessities compel me——I will do it."

"Then there is no more to be said at present," observed the Duke. "There is a light in the hall—we will repair to the dining-room—I cannot promise you a fire——"

"My blood," interrupted Stanhope, "has not yet cooled down from the terrific fever-heat produced by the excitement of the gaming-table. Let us have the bottle of wine—the fire may be dispensed with."

"Come," answered the Duke: "we will have the wine."

Christian then heard the double doors of the library open: the light from the hall gleamed in for a moment, and showed him the two forms as they passed the threshold. Then the doors were closed again; and again was the youth entombed in utter darkness.

But let us explain how it was that he had continued so silent and so still throughout this discourse which he had overheard. When first he became aware that voices were speaking in the library, he was seized, as we have stated, with a certain degree of alarm; and this he could not all in a moment shake off. Called out of his sleep in such a manner—finding himself in the dark—not immediately recollecting where he was—and hearing those voices—he thought he must be in a dream; and the terror which he felt, as well as the numbing cold, completely paralyzed him. When his consciousness became complete, he learnt from the Duke's words that it was long past midnight, and that the household had retired to rest. The thought instantaneously struck him that if he were found there, sitting up at such an hour, he should be chided—perhaps dismissed from the situation which he had only entered in the morning. This idea appalled him; he was bewildered how to act; and while in this terrible state of uncertainty—not daring to move—scarcely to breathe—the conversation progressed rapidly between the Duke and Mr. Stanhope. As the reader has seen, it soon became of a nature which the Duke would not for the world have had anybody overhear; and thus Christian saw that his position was becoming every instant more and more difficult. When the discourse had got to a certain extent, he dared not suddenly raise his voice and proclaim that there was a listener present:—the natural question would be, wherefore he had remained to listen at all? So he continued motionless and silent, in the hope that the Duke and his companion would speedily pass away from the library. But as the discourse progressed, it assumed a complexion so astounding—so startling indeed, if Christian had dared to start at all,—it grew so engrossing in its terrible interest, that forgetting every other circumstance,

he drank in the whole with his amazed sense of hearing. Thus did he tarry there until the end; and even after the double doors had closed behind the Duke and Mr. Stanhope, it was a long time ere Christian could venture to draw a breath freely.

Good heavens, what a tale had he heard! What a diabolical conspiracy had become revealed to his knowledge!—in what a fearful light was the character of his employer suddenly presented to his comprehension! But was it not natural that the youth should say to himself, "It is Providence that placed me here on this occasion, to learn the deeply-plotted scheme of villany, and to become the divine instrument in frustrating it!"

His first impulse was now to rush to the dining-room—proclaim to the two conspirators that their horrible machinations had come to his knowledge—rush forth in disgust from the house—and on the morrow reveal everything to a magistrate, or to the relatives of the Duchess, if he could find out who they were. This, we say, was his first impulse; and he was starting from his seat to obey it—when a thought struck him, and he sat down again. If he were to carry out such a plan, would it succeed? should he be believed? would not the Duke and Stanhope indignantly deny the imputation and denounce it as the raving of a madman or the odious calumny of a miserable impostor? And would not the world give its faith to the bold denial of those two men of high social position, rather than to the unsupported testimony of an obscure individual?—might not such conduct on Christian's part be even attributed to a vindictive feeling towards the man who had recently insulted his sister? All these considerations induced Christian to pause. Then, what course should he pursue? His mind was far too unsettled—his thoughts were too much excited, to allow him to come to any conclusion on the present occasion. He accordingly stole forth from the library—groped his way along a passage to the back staircase—and succeeded in reaching his chamber without disturbing any one.

We should here observe that when the household had retired to rest, Mr. and Mrs. Calvert fancied that the young secretary had already sought his own room,—little dreaming that he had fallen asleep in the library and was continuing to slumber there while lamp and fire went out.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN ADVISER.

CHRISTIAN awoke after a few hours' of troubled repose; and it was still dusk on that cold wintry morning. He did not therefore immediately get up—but began to arrange all his confused ideas, so as to convince himself that what was uppermost in his thoughts was not merely the recollection of a dream. His convictions told him that it was indeed all too true; and he perceived the necessity of deciding on the course which he should adopt.

For the various reasons which had occurred to him on the preceding night, and which we have detailed at the close of the last chapter, he felt how impossible it was to proclaim to the world all he knew. Yet how could he remain in the employment of a man whom he had thus discovered to be the most black-hearted of villains? On the other hand, if he were to withdraw from the house, how could he serve the Duchess and frustrate the satanic plot which was in embryo for her destruction? No—he must remain beneath that roof: for once more did the thought revert to his mind that heaven itself had willed him to become its own instrument for the salvation of an innocent lady and the confusion of her foes. Should he speak to the Duchess upon the subject? No: not for a single moment could he hope or expect that she would believe him. If she had known him for years, it would be different: but he was an utter stranger to her—he had only been in the house a few hours—she had seen him but for a few moments—and it would be the height of madness to expect that she would give credit to a tale so horribly damnatory to her husband's character. He must remain quiet for the present—he must watch the progress of events—and he must act accordingly.

But how could he assume a placid and respectful demeanour in the presence of the Duke? how could he maintain a becoming deportment before one whom he now knew to be a detestable miscreant? Christian abominated dissimulation: he was high-minded and well principled: his soul was imbued with the loftiest notions of honour and integrity: he was as truthful for one of his own sex, as his sister was for a being of the feminine race. And yet if Christian remained at Marchmont House, he must dissimulate—he must to a certain extent play the hypocrite—he must treat the Duke of Marchmont as if he knew naught to his detriment—he must wear a contented, if not a smiling and cheerful countenance: in a word, he must play a part which he despised, loathed, and abhorred. It was difficult indeed for Christian Ashton to bend himself to this necessity: and yet for the sake of the Duchess he resolved to do so. He felt that any sacrifice of feeling must be made on his own part in order to save an innocent lady from the atrocious machinations which had been devised for her destruction.

At about ten o'clock he attended the Duke in the library; and his Grace bade him sit down to answer the letters which had come by that morning's post. These were chiefly on business-matters from the bailiffs of the Duke's provincial estates—from tenants soliciting renewals of leases, or requesting forbearance in respect to arrears of rent—from country-gentlemen earnestly begging the Duke's interest to procure Government situations for their sons or other relatives—and so forth. On the backs of the greater portion of these documents, the Duke noted the replies which were to be transmitted; and Christian proceeded to execute his work to the best of his ability. As each responsive letter was finished, he handed it across the table to the Duke of Marchmont,—who was evidently well satisfied with the manner in which his young secretary acquitted himself of his duties. Thus nearly two hours were passed; and it was about noon when a footman entered and presented to his Grace a card upon a massive and exquisitely wrought silver salver.

"Ah, Mr. Hyde," said the Duke, as he glanced at the card. "I sent for him yesterday. Let him come in."

The footman withdrew; and Christian, thinking that the business might be private, rose from his seat and was about to retire also—but the Duke made a motion for him to remain, observing, "There is no necessity for you to leave. On the contrary, I wish you to pay attention to what is about to take place—so that immediately after Mr. Hyde has departed, you may make notes of our conversation. He is a slippery kind of fellow, and I must nail him to his pledges—or else never again shall he represent a pocket-borough of mine." Then, after a brief pause, the Duke observed for the information of his secretary, "This Mr. Hyde, you must know, is a Member of Parliament."

The door opened; and the footman announced the visitor in a loud voice. Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, M.P. for the borough of Viviandale, was a gentleman about forty—of middle height and spare figure—affected in his looks and speech—smirking and obsequious in his manners. He was exquisitely dressed, in a blue surtout coat, a figured silk waistcoat, black pantaloons, and patent leather boots. His cravat was tied in a most unexceptionable manner; a massive gold chain festooned over his waistcoat; and his kid gloves fitted so tightly that he had some difficulty in drawing off the one from the right hand, as with divers bowings and scrapings he extended that same right hand in the evident expectation that it would be taken by the Duke, towards whom he advanced with a sort of skipping, mincing gait. He was by no means good-looking, notwithstanding all the pains lavished upon his toilet, the wavy curls of his long dark hair, and the artificial gloss of his whiskers. He was every inch the time-server and the parasite,—feeling himself to be dependent upon the breath of the great man to whose presence he was thus summoned, yet endeavouring to carry off the consciousness of his servile condition by a jaunty air of smirking familiarity, which would doubtless impress an inexperienced stranger with the idea that he felt himself to be on a tolerably friendly if not altogether equal footing with his Grace.

But the Duke of Marchmont, bowing distantly, affected not to perceive Fenwick Finnikin Hyde's outstretched hand; and coldly motioned to a seat,—which that gentleman, endeavouring to look surprised at this reception, at once took. Then, as he held his well-brushed glossy hat upon his knees, he said in a weak affected voice, "Glad to see your Grace looking so well. Never saw your Grace looking better. Quite astonishing—'pon my honour!"

The Duke simply inclined his head in acknowledgement of these compliments; and then observed in a cold severe voice, "I requested you to call upon me, Mr. Hyde, that you may give some little explanations——"

"Quite right, my lord! Always glad to wait upon your Grace to explain what is going forward in the political world. But——" and he glanced towards Christian.

"This young gentleman is my private secretary," said the Duke; "and we may speak in his presence. Indeed, he will not pay any attention to what we may have to say: for, as you perceive he is busy in answering letters."

"Oh, very good, my lord!" exclaimed Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, bestowing a patronising smile upon Christian. "Of course, if your Grace has no objection to the young gentleman being present, I can have none. Seen this morning's papers, my lord? Astonishing how they are turning against the Ministry—astonishing, 'pon my honour!"

"And I could wish, Mr. Hyde," said the Duke, with a voice and look of severe meaning, "that certain gentlemen belonging to the House of Commons would be equally firm in their opposition to that same most despicable Cabinet. I think, Mr. Hyde, that you addressed your constituents at Viviandale a few days back?"

"Quite right, my lord," exclaimed the honourable gentleman. "Public dinner given to me by the free and independent electors—exceedingly sorry that your Grace was not in the chair. Astonishing enthusiasm nevertheless,—astonishing, 'pon my honour!"—and Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde caressed his whiskers with an assumed look of complaisance; though a very close observer might have seen that he was sitting somewhat uneasily on his chair, like a school-boy who has committed a fault, and being summoned into the presence of his master, is dreading the moment when he will be charged therewith.

"Yes, Mr. Hyde," resumed Marchmont, still speaking severely, "you *did* attend a public dinner at Viviandale—a dinner, sir, at which there were one hundred and thirty-three electors present—being the Tory majority of the two hundred and nine freemen of the borough. And that Tory majority as a matter of course looks to *me* as the lord and master of their opinions, their consciences, and their souls. There is no mistake about the matter, Mr. Hyde: the borough is mine—and no gentleman can continue to represent it if once he forfeits my confidence."

"Quite right, my lord—certainly not!" ejaculated the Member for Viviandale: and then he smiled with a forced complaceney, as if he meant it to be inferred that *he* had not by any means forfeited his ducal patron's confidence.

"If you consider that I am right, Mr. Hyde," proceeded Marchmont, "you will not be astonished if I frankly intimate that unless your conduct undergoes a change, *you* will at the next general election cease to be the representative of Viviandale. There were passages in your speech, sir, which unmistakably indicated a tendency towards what is generally known as *ratting*——"

"Astonishing, quite astonishing, 'pon my honour!" cried the honourable gentleman, holding up his hands in amazement. "Really, my lord, if your Grace had only heard the cheers which my speech elicited——"

"I care nothing for the cheers, sir," interrupted Marchmont haughtily. "There may perhaps be some few of my tenant-farmers as well as of the tradesmen of Viviandale, who are infected with revolutionary notions, and who in their hearts rebel against my authority. They may therefore cheer, sir, what are called liberal sentiments—although they dare not fly in my face and give their votes in the same sense. But I tell you that I care nothing for the cheers so long as the votes are always of the right sort. Your speech, Mr.

Hyde, savoured of treachery, and there is positively a rumour afloat—I must speak out plainly—that you have sold yourself to the Whigs."

"Astonishing—quite astonishing, 'pon my honour!" ejaculated the honourable gentleman. "Really, my lord, I am surprised that your Grace should give credit to such rumours."

"Take care that they do *not* prove true, Mr. Hyde. Remember the understanding on which you were first brought in for Viviandale—the conditions on which I paid your electioneering expenses—the terms on which for three Parliaments you have represented my borough. By heaven, sir, if you deceive me, you shall be turned out next time; and I will put in my steward or my butler——aye, or even one of my footmen, rather than stand the chance of being turned round upon. You solemnly pledged yourself to stand by Church and State in all things—to denounce the people generally as a base ignorant mob—to hold up the working classes in particular as an unwashed rabble—to oppose everything in the shape of progress—to support all aristocratic privileges—in a word, to conduct yourself as a staunch Tory in all questions where there could be no doubt as to the course you were to pursue, while in all dubious matters you were to vote precisely according to *my* dictation. Now, Mr. Hyde, during the last session you did not act up entirely to these pledges: but I then said nothing on the subject. Your recent speech at Viviandale has however enhanced my misgivings; and the rumours which are afloat almost seem to confirm them. What am I to understand, sir? and what am I to expect?"

"Understand, my lord, nothing against me. Expect, my lord, that I shall serve your Grace in all things. But the fact is," continued Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, with a smile half blandly complacent and half smirkingly sycophantic, "a man must now and then make a show of independence——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed the Duke indignantly. "The borough of Viviandale is my own—as well as those of Rottentown and Mongerville; and depend upon it I shall do as I like with my own. Independence indeed—it is ridiculous! The five seats which those boroughs have in the House of Commons are *mine;* and I mean that the occupants of them shall do *my* bidding. What will become of our blessed Constitution if the proprietors of pocket-boroughs were to allow independence? No such thing, sir! But the fact is you have been coquetting with the Whigs—you have been endeavouring to sell yourself—they would not buy you at your own price—and now you wish to get back into my favour. Pledge yourself that henceforth you will fulfil your compacts—and I will pardon you."

"Your Grace is really too hard upon me," said Mr. Hyde, simpering and smiling, but unable to prevent himself from looking foolish. "It is astonishing how false rumours do get about—astonishing, 'pon my honour! However, as your Grace proposes to stretch forth the hand of friendship, pray suffer me to take it."

"And at the opening of the Session," observed Marchmont, "you will take the earliest opportunity to make such a speech as shall neutralize the evil effect of the one you delivered the other day to my voters at Viviandale?"

"Oh, certainly, my lord!" cried the honourable gentleman. "I will make a speech that shall put matters all to rights, 'pon my honour!"

"And I, Mr. Hyde, shall send you in good time a few strong sentences which you will take care to deliver against the Ministry. When I have leisure I will write down what I think you ought to say on the occasion——"

"Pray do so, my lord: I shall be delighted to profit by your Grace's inspirations! It is astonishing how keen is your Grace's perception—how shrewd your Grace's judgment in respect to the leading topics of the day—astonishing, 'pon my honour!'

Hereupon Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde rose from his seat: the Duke's hand was now stretched out to him—the honourable gentleman pressed it with every appearance of enthusiastic devotion—and obsequiously bowed himself out.

"You will note down the heads of this conversation," said the Duke of Marchmont to Christian, when the door had closed behind the Member for Viviandale. "I am now going out; and when you have taken the notes I speak of, the remainder of the day is at your own disposal."

With these words the Duke of Marchmont quitted the library, leaving Christian in a state of no ordinary amazement at the scene which he had just witnessed. He had hitherto fancied that Great Britain was the freest country on the face of the earth, and that the House of Commons was composed of an independent set of men, honestly, fairly, and impartially representing the whole people. He had now learnt a lesson to the contrary; and he was astonished at the corruption of the system which allowed the Duke of Marchmont the control of those boroughs—enabling him to bestow them upon his own creatures. Not less was Christian surprised and disgusted at the abject servility with which one of those creatures had just abnegated all political independence, though faintly making a show to the contrary. When the young secretary had committed to paper the notes of the conversation at which he had been present, he issued forth to take a walk,—intending to call upon Christina.

He was proceeding through Hyde Park on his way towards Regent's Park, pondering on the character of the Duke of Marchmont—and in no very comfortable mood reflecting on the scene of the preceding night,—when he beheld a tall gentleman approaching. He was enveloped in a cloak; and Christian immediately knew him to be Mr. Redcliffe. The youth was walking slowly in one direction—Redcliffe was advancing as slowly from the other. The latter was evidently absorbed in thought, as was the former. The air was chill: his mantle was closely wrapped around him—the collar reached high up, indeed almost to his cheek-bones—and his hat was drawn somewhat over the upper part of his countenance. He did not at first see Christian, and was about to pass him: but the youth addressed Mr. Redcliffe in courteously becoming terms.

"Ah, I did not perceive you," said this gentleman; "and I am glad you spoke:"—at the same time he proffered the youth his hand. "It is a long while since we last met."

"It is nearly ten weeks, sir," replied Christian.

"I recollect," observed Redcliffe. "It was when

you and your sister had been performing a generous act of charity towards that poor creature——"

"Whose rapid pathway to the grave was smoothed by your bounties," added Christian, who experienced an illimitable admiration for the character of Mr. Redcliffe.

"And where are you living now?" inquired this gentleman, with his characteristic abruptness. "How is your amiable sister? I have thought of you both sometimes; and indeed have been going to ask Mrs. Macaulay concerning you—but something has always occurred to put it out of my head."

"I am grateful, sir," answered Christian, "to learn that my sister and myself have enjoyed your consideration. Christina is living with Lady Octavian Meredith——"

"Ah, then you no longer dwell together—you and your sister?" exclaimed Mr. Redcliffe, now surveying the youth with an increasing interest.

"No, sir; circumstances compelled us to separate. We have to earn our own living: but, thank heaven! my sister is comfortably provided for."

"And you?" asked Redcliffe.

"I am for the present private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont," responded Christian.

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe: and then he hastily observed, "But why do you speak as if your sister *only* was comfortably situated, and *you* were not? Is it because you feel your present position to be a mere temporary one?"

"Yes, sir: for that and another reason——"

But then Christian stopped short, sorry even that he had said so much.

"Has the Duke of Marchmont cause to be dissatisfied with you? has he given you notice to leave him?"

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Christian, speaking with a sort of ardour, in the consciousness that he was giving complete satisfaction to his ducal employer, and that the tenure of his office depended entirely upon himself.

"Perhaps you are dissatisfied with your situation?" said Mr. Redcliffe inquiringly: and Christian perceived that his dark eyes were fixed keenly upon him.

"Frankly speaking, sir," responded the youth, "I am not well pleased with the post which I occupy: and though for a time I may keep it——"

But here again he stopped suddenly short, as the idea flashed to him that possibly Mr. Redcliffe might be acquainted with the Duke—in which case it would be the height of imprudence for him (Christian) to enter into any explanations with regard to the point whereon he had begun to touch.

"You need not be afraid to speak frankly and candidly to me," observed Redcliffe, who seemed at once to fathom the motive of the youth's hesitation. "I have not the slightest acquaintance with the Duke of Marchmont; and even if it were otherwise, I should not betray anything that you might in confidence reveal to me. I experience an interest in you; and if you think fit to regard me as a friend, you shall find me deserving of the title. If I remember right I have learnt that you and your sister are twins, and that you are orphans: your own words just now gave me to understand that you are both dependent on yourselves for your support. In this case you may need the advice of a friend, even if at the moment you require no more substantial succour: but both should be cheerfully given by me."

Christian expressed his gratitude for these assurances; and he experienced a profound pleasure at thus becoming the object of proffered friendship on the part of one whose character he already so much admired.

"Think not, young gentleman," continued Mr. Redcliffe, "that I am inspired by any impertinent curiosity in seeking your confidence——"

"Oh, no, sir! Not for a moment," exclaimed Christian, "could I entertain an idea so injurious towards you!"

"Listen," proceeded Redcliffe. "A youth of your age—thrown upon his own resources, and abroad as it were in the wide world—must inevitably on various occasions need suitable counsel and advice from older and more experienced heads. If I err not, you are at this present moment in some such position. Your sister is well provided for—and I rejoice to hear it: but you yourself appear to be less satisfactorily situated. In a word, you are not happy at the Duke of Marchmont's: or else something has occurred——"

"Something *has* indeed occurred," said Christian, in a mournful voice: and after a few instants' reflection, he added slowly and thoughtfully, "Yes—I do indeed require the counsel of some one who is enabled to give it. I feel that I am placed in a situation of considerable embarrassment—that I have a duty to perform towards an innocent lady whose destruction is resolved upon—but yet that in the performance of this duty I must play the hypocrite——"

"All this, Christian Ashton, is most serious," observed Mr. Redcliffe. "Let us walk to a more secluded place where we can converse together. I see that you will give me your confidence; and again I assure you that you shall never repent it."

Mr. Redcliffe and the youth diverged away together from the neighbourhood of Park Lane where their encounter had taken place; and they rambled slowly across the wide open field of the Park. During this walk Christian explained to Mr. Redcliffe how he had happened to fall asleep in the library on the preceding night—how he had overheard the conversation between the Duke of Marchmont and the Hon. Mr. Stanhope—how, after serious deliberation with himself, he had resolved to dissemble his looks in the presence of his Grace, and retain his situation in the hope of frustrating the diabolical scheme which had been initiated against the Duchess—but how when once this object should have been achieved, he was determined to seek his livelihood elsewhere.

Mr. Redcliffe listened in profound silence. He spoke not a single syllable throughout Christian's narrative: he walked slowly by the youth's side, with his eyes bent down;—and when the tale was ended, upwards of a minute elapsed ere he breathed a word of comment.

"This is indeed most serious," at length observed Mr. Redcliffe, speaking slowly and deliberately, and also in subdued accents. "The views which you have entertained in connexion therewith, are all just and intelligent. You cannot

proclaim the conspiracy aloud to the world: for the world would not believe you—while its laws would punish you as a slanderer and a calumniator. You cannot—at least for the present—warn the Duchess of Marchmont of her danger: or at all events it must not be done by words from *your* lips. Yet you must remain in your present situation—you must keep a strict watch, upon all the Duke of Marchmont's proceedings——yes, *all* of them. You must not hesitate—with false compunctions or over-nice scruples—to listen, when opportunity serves, to conversations between the Duke and his villanous accomplice Stanhope. Everything that comes to your knowledge, must you report to me; and in me shall you find a faithful adviser as well as a sincere friend. Henceforth you will regard me as such; and you must never hesitate to seek my abode, no matter how often or at what hour. You possess feelings, Christian Ashton, which do you honour; and I experience a lively interest in your welfare. You need have no care for the future: for when the time shall come that you must leave a service which is evidently distasteful to you, it shall be my care and my pleasure to procure you another and a better situation. Farewell for the present."

With these words Mr. Redcliffe grasped Christian's hand cordially; and they separated. The youth felt infinitely relieved at having made a confidant of one in whom he had also found a friend; and he proceeded with a much lighter heart towards the Regent's Park. He saw his sister; and affectionate was the embrace in which the twins held each other. Christian mentioned the circumstance of his being already aware that Lord Octavian and Mr. Percival were one and the same person; and Christina frankly told him all the conversation which had taken place between herself and his lordship on the preceding day,—thus describing the motives which had induced her to conceal from Zoe the fact that she was previously acquainted with Octavian. Christian fully appreciated those motives, and expressed his belief that his sister had acted as she was bound to do under the circumstances. Christina then remarked that the Duke of Marchmont had called on the preceding day,—adding, "He seems a very nice nobleman, and spoke in kind terms of you."

Christian had already made up his mind not to reveal to his sister those circumstances of which he had been speaking to Mr. Redcliffe: for he knew full well that Christina would only be afflicted at the thought of her brother being compelled to remain in a position which was distasteful to him. That observation of her's, so artlessly eulogistic of the Duke, would have thrown Christian into considerable embarrassment, had not Zoe at the moment entered the room where this interview was taking place; and she welcomed the youth to the house in the most cordial manner. He walked out with his sister for an hour or two in the Regent's Park, and then returned to Belgrave Square.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CRIME.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the evening of that day of which we have been writing in the preceding chapter, that three persons were advancing in three different directions towards the goldbeater's house in the midst of that maze of buildings lying between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. One of those individuals was Barney the Burker—the second was Bill Scott—the third was his brother Tim. The two lads had been informed by Barnes that if they joined him at the Smedleys', they would probably be able to render some little assistance in a particular business which was then in hand: but beyond these few words the Burker gave no special explanations.

The night was dark and cold,—not with the fine frosty weather which properly belonged to that December season of the year—but with a raw mistiness that damped the garments and collected on the hair and whiskers. It was an evening when those who were well clad would wrap their upper coats or their shawls, as the case might be, more closely around them—and when the scantily apparelled and the ragged children of poverty would hurry on with a continuous shivering of the frame which no acceleration of speed could however mitigate. Even the very baked-potato man would shudder visibly as he bawled out "All hot!" in a lustier voice than usual; and there was no need for naked-footed mendicants to affect a quivering misery of the form as they huddled up in door-ways or hung upon the track of passers-by, imploring alms; for the reality of their half-perished state was keen enough. The street-lamps appeared to burn mistily: and the jets of gas at the butchers' shops and the coal sheds threw forth a less vivid glare than usual. Barney the Burker raised the collar of his coat over his ears, and pulled his greasy comforter up to his lips,—at the same time diving both his hands into the capacious pockets of his coat, as he sped briskly along. The Scotts respectively pursued their own shivering ways, without the advantage of either upper coat or comforter: for the good luck which they had experienced in their predatory exploits the evening but one before, had led to no improvement of their costume, inasmuch as Barney the Burker purposely kept them in this impoverished and half-ragged state that they might have the appearance of mendicants and thus all the more easily conduct their operations on the pockets of the unwary.

Barney was the first to reach the Smedleys' house, which he entered by means of the alley leading by the side of the chapel; and in a few minutes he was followed by the elder Scott. At the expiration of a few more minutes the younger lad joined them; and they were all three soon seated in the scullery in company with the Smedleys and Mrs. Webber. Liquor and glasses were upon the table; and supplies of hot grog were mixed, while the conversation commenced.

"Well, so nuffin was done yesterday?" said the Burker, after a few indifferent remarks had been exchanged. "I should have looked down last

night accordin' to appintment, if it hadn't been for the message you, Jack, sent to the contrairy by Tim Scott when you happened to meet him."

"Don't you remember," said Mrs. Smedley, "it was agreed upon we should get hold of that letter which Mr. Smith was going to send off——"

"Aye, to be sure," remarked the Burker: "and so I suppose he didn't send no letter at all?"

"Not yesterday," replied Mrs. Smedley: "he said he should put it off till to-day."

"And he was in a worse tremble than ever when he said so," added the old mother.

"Quite narvous—eh?" said the Burker; and then he took a long draught of spirits-and-water. "There's nothing like this for the narves; and I do raly think that a genelman could go as a genelman ought to Tuck up Fair, and cut his last fling in an exceedin' dashin' style, if he was only well primed with lush. But come—what about this here letter?"

"It's nothing particular after all," said Jack Smedley. "But here it is——No, you have got it, Bab; and you can let Barney read it for himself."

"If the writing's at all queer," responded the Burker, "it's of no more use to ask me to read it, than to tell a pig to dance a hornpipe on stilts. My larning might all be put into a thimble, and then leave room for the young lady which is accustomed to use it to put her forefinger in."

"Well, the writing isn't so trembling and shaky as one might expect to find it," said Bab Smedley; "and so you may read it for yourself."

With these words, she drew forth the intercepted letter, which she handed to Barney the Burker, who, having imbibed another draught from his tumbler, proceeded to peruse it in a cool and deliberate manner.

"No—there's nuffin here that's of any consequence to us," he observed, when he reached the end; "and so I suppose I may just as well light a pipe with it."

"No such thing," exclaimed Bab, snatching the letter out of the fellow's hand. "I mean to keep it—I have a fancy for doing so. Who knows but what some day or another it may be of use?"

"Ah, well—do just as you like," said the Burker: "but of course you don't mean to seal up the letter again and deliver it to-morrow morning at the place it's directed to?"

"Not quite such a fool!" rejoined Mrs. Smedley.

"To be sure not!" observed Barnes: "for him or her who took it to the house might be knowed again on any future occasion by the servant, or by them to which it is addressed; and then if any stir was made about the disappearance of a partickler individual——though by the bye, he doesn't give no name and no address in that there letter——"

"But he says enough," cried Jack Smedley, "to prove that he has been a jolly rogue in his way."

"How would it be," asked Mrs. Webber, "to make free with his purse before his very face—take it in a bold manner, I mean, and tell him to do his worst, for that we have found out all about him——"

"No," interrupted Bab Smedley; "that will not do. How do we know that he has really done sufficient to make him so terribly afraid of the law as we may think that he has? It is little better than surmise on our part: for that letter doesn't prove much, and is so vague."

"No, no, ma'am," said the Burker, addressing himself to Mrs. Webber; "it would never do to go on a mere wentur'. Whatsumever this Smith may have done, the loss of his purse might make him uproarious, raise the neighbourhood, and send us all to limbo. The work must be done in quite another way."

"To be sure," said Bab Smedley, after a little reflection: "Barney is right. Smith may have been, and no doubt is, a great rogue——"

"And so let him be punished for his wickedness!" interjected the Burker: then fixing his horrible eyes upon Bab Smedley, whom he evidently regarded as the supreme authority in that house, he said, "Well, I s'pose your mind's made up, and it's for to-night?"

"It must be for to-night if it is to be at all," responded Bab: "for he said he was going away to-morrow."

"And I am sure he will too, if he is alive to do it," said Mrs. Webber: "for he was packing up his few things in his carpet-bag when I went to his room with the supper-tray just now."

"Now then, you two fellers," said the Burker, as he filled himself another glass and thus addressed the Scotts, "you've already got to thank me for having done a blessed sight more to keep you on with your edication than ever your own parents would have done if they was alive to take care of yer. And so as you've got on so well in what one may call the rudiments of your larnin', I'm going to put you up into a higher class to-night and teach you another lesson. That was the reason I told you to come here on this partiklar occasion; and p'raps it is as well that there should be as much help as possible."

The two lads said not a word; but they seemed to have a perfect idea that some darker and deeper wickedness than any they had been yet acquainted with, was about to be perpetrated. Bill Scott's large goggle eyes stared in a sort of glassy admiration upon the Burker, whom he evidently regarded as a very fine fellow; while his brother Tim leered with a horrible knowingness upon the same individual,—thus not merely indicating that he comprehended the nature of the deed that was to be done, but that he was all too ready to bear a part in it.

The Burker and Bab Smedley conversed together for some minutes in whispers: then whispered remarks were also interchanged betwixt them, the woman's husband and her mother; and in a short time the plan of proceeding was duly settled. Soon afterwards—it being now about half-past ten o'clock—Mrs. Webber lighted a chamber-candle, and quitted the scullery. In a few minutes she returned: and having carefully closed the door, she observed, "I have been up to ask him if he wants anything more: he says no, for that he is going to bed."

"And you didn't tell him," asked the Burker, with a horrible grin, "that you had some friends here which would presently bring him up his gruel?"

"He told me to call him early," continued the old woman, not heeding the interjected remark which

was so replete with a revolting levity in its allusion to the dreadful crime that had been determined upon. "I asked him at what hour; and he said at six o'clock, as he wanted to get off before daylight; for now that his mind was made up for departure, he says, he has a very great way to go."

"His departur', I rayther think," said Barnes, pursuing his vein of hideous, horrible jocularity, "will take place sooner than he suspects; and the way he has to go will be a precious deal longer than he has bargained for."

"He says he is going upon the Continent," added Mrs. Webber.

"Well, if he likes to give that there name to the place where old Nick lives, he is werry welcome," observed Barney.

"I left him—and he locked the door, as he always does," said Mrs. Webber.

"I've got my tools with me," exclaimed the Burker. "There's as tidy a lot of skellingtons as ever was seen!"—and as he thus spoke, he produced an old cotton pocket-handkerchief in which the skeleton keys thus alluded to were so wrapped up as to prevent them from rattling or chinking as he walked.

"I am afraid your tools will be of no good, Barney," said Mrs. Webber; "for the lodger always leaves the key in the lock. The door must not be forced open with any degree of violence: he would raise the whole neighbourhood with his cries and yells in no time."

"What should prevent us from getting in at the window?" asked Jack Smedley. "It looks on the back yard——"

"Winders be hanged!" ejaculated the Burker. "If he sleeps light, he would be sure and hear the noise of the winder lifting up: and if so be it's fastened, there's the chance of smashing the glass in cutting out a hole with the glazier's di'mond to thrust one's fist in and unfasten it. No, no—that's not the dodge. Don't be afeard, ma'am," continued the ruffian, addressing himself specially to Mrs. Webber, "I'll soon have the key out of the lock, and no mistake."

"How?" inquired Jack Smedley.

"Never do you mind: you'll see all about it byme bye. But we must do nuffin for an hour or so, till the covy's fast locked in the arms of Murphy. So now for a booze and blowing a cloud."

An hour and a half were passed in drinking on the part of all, combined with smoking on that of the male portion of the miscreant gang; and when the kitchen clock had proclaimed midnight, the Burker knocked the ashes out of his pipe and drained his glass.

"Now for business," he said, rising from his seat. "Come, Jack—you will go along with me: so let's take off our boots. You," he added, turning to Mrs. Smedley, "must come to hold the candle. You, ma'am—and you two lads—must wait down here till you're wanted?"

Barney and Jack Smedley took off their boots; and Mrs. Smedley, with the chamber-candle in her hand, led the way from the scullery. Noiselessly and cautiously did the three wretches ascend to the first floor—the old woman and the two lads remaining below. With such stealthiness did the Burker and the Smedleys mount the stairs, that not a board creaked; and Bab was careful that her garments should not even rustle against the wall. On reaching the landing, the Burker bade Mrs. Smedley hold the candle near the key-hole, but so shade it with her hand that the light should not penetrate through into the chamber. He then applied his ear to the key-hole, and listened with breathless attention. Perhaps a person less experienced than the ruffian was in such matters, would scarcely have succeeded in ascertaining that the inmate of the chamber slept: but Barney had made all these sorts of things a particular study—and there was no detail requisite for the working out of a successful iniquity, which he had not carefully practised. Slowly withdrawing his head from the vicinage of the key-hole at the expiration of a minute, he gave his accomplices to understand by a significant nod that their intended victim slept. Yes—he slept at the midnight hour, when the ruthless miscreants were bent upon his destruction!

The key, as Mrs. Webber had represented, was in the lock; and Barney now ascertained that it was turned round in such a way that it could not be pushed straight into the room, even if he had entertained the notion of adopting a course which by being certain to make it fall on the boards within, would stand the chance of startling the lodger. The end of the key projected out a very little way from the hole, on the exterior side of the door; and the Burker, having directed Bab to hold the light in a particular manner, proceeded with his operations. He drew forth from his pocket a stout piece of wire; and this he fastened round the end of the key. It was now easy to turn the key in such a way that it could be thrust out of the lock on the inner side of the door; while the wire not merely prevented it from falling on the boards, but likewise held it pendent at a sufficient distance from the door itself so as to preclude the possibility of its knocking against the panels. A skeleton key was now introduced into the lock thus skilfully cleared; and in a few minutes the door was opened.

Barney made a sign for Bab to stand back, so that not a single gleam of light should penetrate into the room; and again he listened attentively. All of a sudden he closed the door, and made another sign, to indicate that the lodger was awakening. A panic-terror seized upon Jack Smedley; and clutching the Burker with one hand, and his wife with the other, he endeavoured to drag them both away from the spot. Bab herself was irresolute how to act: the Burker, ferociously determined, shook Smedley off, and made fierce gesticulations to the effect that the work *must* be finished, for that they had gone too far to recede. But Jack Smedley was no longer master of himself: he was trembling all over—his countenance was as pale as death—and the infection of his own terrors was being rapidly communicated to his wife. The Burker continued to gesticulate in a menacing manner; and his looks denoted supreme disgust and contempt for Jack Smedley.

"No, no! the whole neighbourhood will be alarmed!" whispered this individual, as he once more clutched the Burker by the arm.

"Ah! what's this?" cried a voice from within, at the same instant that the handle of the door was heard to turn; and the key pendent to the wire, knocked against the panel.

Barney dashed the door violently open; and a heavy fall was heard, instantaneously followed by a cry for help. Then the Burker dealt a tremendous blow with the butt-end of a pistol which he snatched forth from his pocket; and Bab Smedley, suddenly recalling all her courage, rushed in with the light. The lodger lay upon the floor, low moans escaping from his lips: but those quickly ceased, as the remorseless Burker dealt him another terrific blow with his weapon—a blow which beat in the unfortunate victim's forehead. It was done—the murder was accomplished—and that victim was no more!

It was evident that being disturbed by the noise at the door, he had got out of bed to ascertain what was the matter—he had huddled on his pantaloons—and he was about to open the door to listen whether all was quiet, or whether there were indeed anything wrong going on in the house,—when the circumstance of his hand encountering the wire and the key had confirmed his terror and had caused an ejaculation to fall from his lips. There he now lay upon the floor—a corpse, with his forehead battered in!

"Come, you fool," said Bab Smedley to her husband; "don't stand like a coward there——"

"No coward, Bab! *That* feeling is gone," interrupted Jack, whose courage now likewise returned, the fear of danger being suddenly passed. "Let's look after the swag."

"Aye, that's it," said the Burker, "and dispose of the stiff'un arterwards. Well, the job was done neat enough arter all; though I tell you what, Master Jack, no thanks to you if we didn't make a mess of the whole affair. You and me has done two or three things in our life-time; but I never see you get so chicken-hearted afore."

"It wasn't the thing itself I was afraid of," answered Smedley, by no means relishing these taunts: "it was the fear of having the whole neighbourhood roused."

"And so you would, if it hadn't been for me," rejoined the Burker in a savage tone. "Howsumever, it's all over now——Ah, and here's the blunt!"

For while the ruffian was giving utterance to those words, he stooped down and felt in the pockets of the murdered man's pantaloons. He drew forth two purses; and a hasty examination of the contents showed him that though one contained but a trifle of money, the contents of the other amounted to about five hundred pounds. This was an infinitely greater treasure than any of the wretches expected to acquire by their deed of turpitude; and their spirits rose to the highest point of horrible exultation.

"Now let Mrs. Webber come and mop up them boards at vunce," said the Burker; "or else there'll be marks on 'em as will tell tales. And you, Bab, can stop with the lads to get the trap-door up, while me and Jack brings down the stiff'un. The sooner all's put to rights the better."

Mrs. Smedley, placing the light upon a chest of drawers, hastily descended the stairs; and in a few minutes the old woman made her appearance in the chamber, with a pail of hot water and a flannel. But little blood had flowed on the floor; and none had reached the carpet, of which there was only a slip by the side of the bed. The vile woman showed no more feeling than that which a slight shudder expressed, as her first glance was flung upon the corpse; and this arose merely from a swiftly transient sense of recoil from the spectacle of the battered forehead—but certainly not from any compunction at the atrocious deed itself. The floor was soon cleansed with the flannel; and then, as the old woman held the light, the Burker and Jack Smedley, raising the body between them, began to carry it down the stairs.

The scullery was reached; and now the two lads for the first time looked upon a form whence murder had expelled the breath of life!—for the first time did they behold a corpse which was made so by the black turpitude of assassination! An instant—and only for an instant—did they shrink back from the spectacle: a moment too—and only for a moment—did their minds appear to receive a shock; and then their brutal, savage self-possession was regained: the fierceness of their instincts appeared to triumph over any latent glimmering of their better feelings. The Burker contemplated them both from the corners of his eyes: he saw full well what was passing within them; and a devilish expression of satisfaction appeared upon his hideous countenance, as he felt that they were now more than ever bound fast in the trammels which he had cast around them, and by means of which he rendered them ductile and pliant to all his purposes of evil.

The table was moved away from the middle of the scullery—the square piece of carpet on which it was wont to stand, was likewise taken up—and a trap-door was raised. This trap-door revealed a considerable aperture: it was the mouth of a pit, whence a disagreeable earthy smell came up. There were steps leading down into the abyss; and to that depth was the corpse conveyed by Barney the Burker and Jack Smedley. The two women and the two lads stood close by the trap-door, gazing upon the scene which the light of the candle illuminated with a sufficiency to throw out its most hideous and ghastly features. And horrible indeed was that scene,—horrible the face of the miscreant Burker, bending over the rigid and blood-stained countenance of the murdered man—that countenance, too, on the upper part of which there appeared so frightful a wound!

"Hush," said Bab Smedley, suddenly breaking the silence which prevailed. "I do believe there is some one in the passage up-stairs!"

"Nonsense!" growled the Burker: "if all the doors is shut, how can there be any one in the house? And if there is, we'll serve him as we've done the stiff'un here."

"Do be quiet!" whispered Mrs. Smedley with affrighted impatience. "I am certain there *are* footsteps!"

The woman spoke so confidently that all did now remain perfectly quiet, with suspended breath: but no sound met their ears—and Mrs. Smedley yielded to the conclusion that it was only fancy on her part. But all of a sudden there was a strange rushing noise in the passage above: the body fell from the Burker's grasp—and Jack Smedley, who was lower down the steps, sustaining the feet of the murdered man, fell backward with considerable violence, the corpse rolling upon him. It was in the bottom of the vault that this horrible

incident took place; and a cry of terror ascended from that depth. Then the next moment the gold-beater was seen rushing up the steps as if he were demented—his hair standing on end—his countenance ghastly pale—his lips white—his eyes rolling with horror.

"You fool, you!" muttered his wife, clutching him violently by the arm, and giving him a savage shake: "you'll make yourself heard yet before you have done!"

It must be observed that Barney the Burker had not let the corpse fall through any access of panic-terror—but merely that he might rush upstairs and ascertain the cause of that strange sweeping sound which had reached the ears of those in the scullery. But on opening the door and listening, he found that all was still.

"Give me a light," he said, "and I'll go over the house just for your saytisfaction: cos why, none of you seem able to do it for yourselves."

A candle was immediately supplied him by one of the lads; and the instant he appeared in the ground-floor passage with that light, the rushing sound was heard again—and an enormous cat which had been crouching on the mat, sprang up the stairs to the higher storeys. The Burker gave a chuckling laugh; and descending to the scullery, closed the door, saying, "It's on'y a great big black cat that's got into the house."

"It's the people's at the beer-shop," exclaimed Bab Smedley.

"But isn't it strange," asked the gold-beater, who was shuddering all over, "that the brute should cut about the house like that? Doesn't it seem as if it knew what had been done?"—and with his haggard eyes he glanced towards the mouth of the vault.

"Well, I des say there's summut like instink in the affair," said the Burker coolly: "but as cats can't speak, they can't tell no tales—and so we needn't bother ourselves any more about the matter. Come, Jack, take a drop of brandy; and don't make such a fool of yourself as you seem to be doing. Why, I can't make out what's come over you all on a sudden, that you have got so precious chicken-hearted. It isn't a werry good example you're setting them lads. Where's the quicklime?"

"All ready down below," responded Bab Smedley: then addressing herself to her husband, she said savagely, "There, toss off that brandy, and be a man! I'm ashamed of you!"

The gold-beater drank the raw spirit which his wife handed him; and his courage speedily revived again.

"Come now, my boys, and lend a hand below," said the Burker: "you must 'custom yerselves to get familiar with stiff 'uns. You come too, Jack."

The gold-beater and the Burker descended into the vault, with a candle—the two Scotts following with readiness and alacrity. A spade and pickaxe were in the pit—a hole was speedily dug, sufficiently large to receive the corpse—a quantity of quicklime was thrown upon it—the earth was shovelled back—it was well flattened down, so as to make the bottom of the subterranean level—and thus the work was accomplished.

The trap-door was closed—the carpet was drawn over it—the table was restored to its place—quantities of spirits-and-water were mixed—and the wretches caroused above the spot to which their victim had been consigned. The Burker and Bab Smedley ascended to the chamber where the deed was accomplished: they ransacked the contents of the carpet-bag—but they found no papers of any kind—no farther hoard of money. But on the drawers was a very handsome repeater-watch, together with a gold pencil-case and two or three rings. These valuables were of course taken possession of; and the two wretches descended to rejoin their companions. A division of the booty now took place—more grog was drunk—and it was past two in the morning when the Burker and the Scotts took their departure, at intervals of a few minutes, by means of the back part of the premises and the narrow alley by the side of the chapel.

"You behaved like a fool to-night," said Bab Smedley to her husband, when they were at length alone together in their own chamber.

"I can't tell what it was that came over me when we were all three together at *his* door," said the gold-beater. "And then the affair in the vault was horrible enough! To have that corpse come tumbling down upon one was sufficient to make the hair stand on end. And mind you, Bab—*you* were not altogether yourself to-night: *you* were frightened up at the door—and you were frightened again too by the noise of that cursed cat."

"Well, there's enough of it!" said the woman sharply: for her husband had spoken truly, and she herself had been more accessible to terror on this particular night than on the occasion of any previous deed of iniquity.

"I tell you what, Bab," said the gold-beater, looking somewhat nervously around the room, and speaking in the half-hushed voice which denoted a certain inward appalled feeling: "I don't like that affair of the cat—there was something superstitious in it—it was the animal's instinct!"

"Now, *will* you have done?" demanded Bab Smedley, turning with sudden fierceness round upon her husband: but her own face was as ghastly pale as his was—and as their eyes met he saw that she was under the same superstitious terror as that which was awing and appalling his own soul.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LISTENER.

A WEEK had elapsed since the occurrences just related; and during this interval the Hon. Wilson Stanhope had called three or four times, and had dined twice at Marchmont House.

He was a man of about five-and-thirty years of age—handsome, though with a somewhat dissipated and rakish look. He had been for some years in the Horse Guards; and although his necessities had compelled him to sell his commission, he still affected to a certain degree a military appearance: that is to say, he continued to wear his moustache. His features were regular, but somewhat bold and prominent: the expression of his countenance was decidedly sensuous. His hair was light: his eyes were large, and had a

look of bold hardihood when contemplating females, —thus indicating the thorough libertine. Though of profligate habits—a confirmed gamester—a spendthrift—and an unprincipled seducer, yet he had done nothing to cause his expulsion from fashionable society. A man may cheat a thousand creditors if they be only tradesmen, without losing his caste: but if he fail to pay a single debt contracted on the race-course or at the gaming-table, he at once forfeits his rank and consideration as a gentleman. He may beguile credulous women by myriads of dishonourable artifices: and yet he can still hold his head high and proclaim himself an honourable man. But if he forfeit his word in the slightest degree to any individual in his own sphere, his honour is instantaneously considered as lost. Such are the usages, rules, and customs of the fashionable world; and therefore a man like Mr. Stanhope, though saturated with all vices, may continue to look everybody in the face, and no one will dream of excluding him from the sphere in which he moves.

Such was the individual who was leagued with the Duke of Marchmont to accomplish the destruction of the Duchess. During the week which had elapsed since the infamous compact was made, he had already been admitted to a footing of intimacy in the Duke's mansion; and the Duchess had received him with a becoming courtesy. She herself was ignorant of his profligate habits: she might perhaps have heard it whispered "that he was a little gay"—but though herself a thoroughly well principled and right-minded woman, she nevertheless knew that if she were to look coldly upon all the male portion of her visitors who bore a similar reputation to that of Mr. Stanhope, she would have to debar herself from society altogether. Besides, she was docile to the will of her husband: it was not in her nature to rebel against him: she was already unhappy enough on account of his neglect to be careful not to aggravate it into downright hatred—for she knew not the full extent of that feeling of bitterness which he entertained towards her. *His* friends became *her* friends: it was sufficient for Lavinia that her husband wished her to receive any particular individuals with cordiality, to ensure that hospitable welcome on her part;—and thus was she giving her hand to the villain who was secretly pledged to the accomplishment of her destruction.

In order that the reader may properly understand the scene which we are about to relate, it is necessary to give some little description of that cabinet which joined the library. It has already been described as a sort of slip, containing only one window, and commodious enough for a person to lounge in by himself, or for a couple of friends to indulge in a confidential chat or discuss a bottle of wine. It seemed to have been intended by the architect who built the mansion, to serve as a little retiring-room from the library itself: for in addition to the door opening from the passage, there was another door of communication between the cabinet and the library. But on taking possession of that mansion, the Duke of Marchmont had completely cut off the cabinet from the library, by having the door fastened up and book-shelves arranged against it in the library itself. The fact was, his Grace had purchased more books than the original conveniences of the library could well contain. Not that he himself had purposed at the time to plunge headlong into all those intellectual treasures: his reading was limited enough,—the newspapers and new novels, with perhaps a few political pamphlets and Parliamentary Blue Books, constituting the range thereof. Those quantities of volumes therefore, so elegantly bound, were bought for ornament and show,—just as were the vases which stood upon the landings, the specimens of sculpture on the staircases and in the passages, or the pictures which hung to the walls. He had purchased, then—as we have said—more books than could be conveniently stowed away in the cases originally provided for them; and not choosing to have them thrust into a cupboard or put anywhere out of sight, he had caused shelves to be arranged against the door opening into the cabinet.

Now, Christian had one day discovered, while sitting in the cabinet, that a conversation going on in the library could be overheard with very little difficulty by any one in the former place: that is to say, if such person chose to play the part of a regular eavesdropper and apply his ear to the door which was fastened up. Be it well understood that Christian would under ordinary circumstances have scorned to become a willing and wilful eavesdropper: but he had been counselled by Mr. Redcliffe to keep the strictest watch on the proceedings and conduct of the Duke of Marchmont—and this advice, under those circumstances which are known to the reader, he was resolved to follow out.

One forenoon—at the expiration of that week to which we have alluded—Christian was seated with the Duke of Marchmont in the library, when a domestic entered to announce that Mr. Armytage solicited an immediate interview with his Grace. Christian perceived a strong expression of vexation and annoyance pass over the Duke's countenance—an expression indeed which was so extraordinary that though it immediately passed away, it dwelt in the youth's mind. He of course knew that Mr. Armytage was Lady Octavian Meredith's father: he knew likewise that the Duke of Marchmont visited the Mereditbs; and he was therefore astonished that the announcement of the name of Zoe's sire should produce such an effect on his ducal employer. More than all this too, he had learnt from his sister, in the course of conversation, that Mr. Armytage was many years back a dependant of the Duke's in the form of land-steward, bailiff, or something of the kind—and that thence was the origin of his fortune. How was it, therefore, that his Grace should unwittingly evince such an antipathy to the mere mention of Mr. Armytage's name?

"You can retire," said the Duke to Christian when the servant had withdrawn to introduce Mr. Armytage. "There is no more correspondence requiring my attention to-day; and your time is therefore now your own."

Christian bowed and issued from the library: but he was irresistibly led to enter the cabinet, where upon the table lay two or three books which he had selected for perusal and which he had left there. It can be easily understood how, in the circumstances in which young Ashton was placed, everything that seemed at all mysterious or unaccountable in respect to the Duke of Marchmont

should have become a matter of deep importance to himself. And then too the counsel he had received from Mr. Redcliffe was continuously uppermost in his mind—to keep a watch on all the Duke's proceedings, and to report everything to the said Clement Redcliffe. He had the highest confidence in this gentleman's sagacity and good intentions; and without at all foreseeing the means which Mr. Redcliffe might recommend for contravening the diabolical plot that was now in full progress against the honour and well-being of the Duchess, Christian felt assured that the more facts he could glean in respect to the Duke's proceedings, the greater would become the resources and the easier the plans by which Mr. Redcliffe would accomplish the salvation of the Duchess and the discomfiture of her foes. All these considerations decided Christian to listen to what was about to take place between Marchmont and Mr. Armytage.

"Your Grace will excuse me for intruding thus early upon your privacy," said Armytage, as he was ushered into the library: "but when I explain myself——"

"You don't mean to say," interrupted the Duke, "that you have any fresh favour to ask at my hands—any new demand to make upon me?"

"Indeed, my lord," replied Armytage, "I come to you for that purpose."

"And what is it?" asked the Duke. "Why, it is but six or seven months ago since I did all you required me in a certain matter"—thus significantly alluding to the impulse which he had given to the courtship of Octavian Meredith in respect to the beautiful Zoe.

"I am perfectly sensible, my lord," responded Armytage, "of all your great kindness on that occasion; and I can assure you that nothing but the sternest necessity would bring me hither as a suppliant for an additional proof of your generosity and friendship."

"On my soul, this language of your's, Armytage," said the Duke curtly, "is foreboding of a demand of no ordinary magnitude."

"It is an affair of magnitude to myself," rejoined Zoe's father,—"but of very trifling consideration to your Grace."

"Well, hasten and come to the point," said the Duke: "for I have business to attend to elsewhere."

"This, then, is the point, my lord," resumed Armytage: "I am in immediate need of fifty thousand pounds."

"Fifty thousand pounds?" echoed Marchmont: and his voice, to Christian's ears, sounded as if it were expressive of a perfect consternation.

"Nothing more nor less, my lord," responded Armytage, with a decisiveness which was far more astonishing to young Ashton.

"But this is ridiculous!" cried the Duke. "You—a rich man——"

"Have the kindness to hear me, my lord," interrupted the speculator. "Some three months back—or nearly so—a certain person in whom I had the utmost faith, decamped suddenly, leaving his own affairs in such a frightful condition that a *fiat* of bankruptcy was issued against him. He has not surrendered to that *fiat:* indeed he has never since been heard of: and so completely ruined was he—or else so effectually did he realize his available funds, and thereby defraud his creditors—that there is not a shilling in the pound to divide amongst them. But this is not all. He committed forgeries to the amount of thirty thousand pounds; and unfortunately all those forged bills have passed through my hands. My name is upon them: they will be due to-morrow—and the holders will look to me for the liquidation thereof. But in addition to those forged bills, I am a sufferer to the extent of an additional twenty thousand pounds by this Mr. Preston——"

"Preston—Preston?" said the Duke, in a musing tone. "What—he who lived——"

"Not far from me, in the Regent's Park."

"Ah, to be sure. The Ashtons——"

"I know it, my lord," said Armytage. "That young lady who is staying with my daughter—and her brother, who is in your lordship's household—suffered in some way or another by that man's flight."

"And is it possible that *you* are really hampered?" demanded the Duke in a tone of voice which showed how little agreeable to him was Armytage's request for a loan.

"I have told your Grace precisely how I am situated," replied Mr. Armytage: "and every moment that we expend in conversation, is so much time unnecessarily thrown away."

"But fifty thousand pounds!" said the Duke: "it is an enormous sum. I do not exceed my income—but I live close up to it—and positively I cannot lay my hands at a moment's warning on a quarter of that amount. Indeed I question whether I have ten thousand at my banker's at this present instant."

"The Duke of Marchmont's name is good at his bankers' for one hundred thousand, if that were all," responded Armytage, with the tone of a man who was by no means inclined to take a refusal, nor to hear difficulties started without overruling them.

"Yes: but one does not always like to borrow of one's banker," continued the Duke.

"Then I will introduce your Grace to a person in the City——"

"What! a money-lender?" ejaculated Marchmont, as if in deep indignation and disgust.

"I do not think," responded Armytage, "that it would be the first time your lordship had come in contact with usurers. When simply Lord Clandon——"

"Enough, Travers—enough!" exclaimed the Duke, sternly and curtly.

"Ah, my lord!" quickly interjected Armytage: "you have let slip a name which I have long ceased to bear."

"Did I?—I noticed it not," said the Duke. "But really, my dear Armytage, you must raise this money in some other way——"

"Impossible, my lord! I cannot do it with my own resources. If *I* went to a money-lender to ask for a loan on my own account, it would be whispered abroad, and I should be ruined. But if your Grace will not borrow of your banker, and if you also have an insuperable objection against applying to a usurer, you may give me your bill or your bond: and with such a security I can at once obtain the funds I require."

"And about the repayment?" asked the Duke.

"Consider, Armytage—fifty thousand pounds is no small debt to contract."

"I am aware of it," responded Zoe's father: "but I have no fear in respect to my ability to refund it in due time. I have numerous sums to receive from noblemen and gentlemen in the course of the year——"

"Then wherefore not render those securities available for your purpose?" ejaculated Marchmont, clutching greedily at the idea which he hoped might save him from having to yield to Armytage's demand.

"Because, my lord," was the reply, "if I were to part with those securities, I should lose my clients. The money-lenders into whose hands they fell, would take away my patrons from me."

"But really, Travers——"

"That name again!" ejaculated Armytage.

"Well, well—you have yourself to blame for it, inasmuch as you ere now recalled those times when you bore that name, and when you were very differently situated from what you are now. Consider all I have done for you——"

"In one word, my lord," interrupted Armytage, "am I to have this money? or am I not?"

"And if I say that I cannot possibly accommodate you?" inquired the Duke.

"Then I am a ruined man—and I blow my brains out," was the unhesitating rejoinder given by Zoe's father. "But, my lord, in such an extreme and frightful case," he added, in a voice so low that his words only just reached Christian's ears,—"I should not pass out of this world without leaving behind me a written history of my life, and all my experiences of whatsoever sort they may have been."

There was a long pause in the discourse; and it was at length broken by the Duke of Marchmont, who said, "At what time to-day must you have this money?"

"It should all be paid into my bankers' hands by five o'clock this evening," responded Armytage.

"It shall be there!" said the Duke: and almost immediately afterwards Zoe's father took his departure.

Christian instantaneously quitted the cabinet, for fear lest the Duke should happen to look into that room; and he at once ascended to his own chamber. There he sat down to reflect upon what he had heard. He was sorry that he had listened: remorseful feelings arose within him, inasmuch as none of the discourse which had thus reached his ears, bore the slightest reference to the horrible conspiracy in progress against the peace and reputation of the Duchess of Marchmont. Christian could not hide from himself the fact that he had done an unhandsome thing: in sooth, he was ashamed of his own conduct. He did not know whether to report all he had learnt to Mr. Redcliffe, or not. But still he thought that as he had in the first instance set himself to listen with a special object, he had better communicate the results to that gentleman. And this reflection led him on to another—which was that it was probable Mr. Redcliffe's plan of proceeding was to gain possession of some secrets in respect to the Duke, for the purpose of wielding them as a means for compelling him to do justice to the unfortunate Duchess.

"And if this be Mr. Redcliffe's aim," thought Christian to himself, "it is perhaps fortunate after all that I *did* listen to the conversation between his Grace and Mr. Armytage. I am fighting in a good cause and on the side of justice. The cause is that of an inoffensive, a virtuous, and an excellent lady, against whom the foulest of conspiracies has been set on foot; and all weapons which Mr. Redcliffe and myself may use to frustrate the odious scheme, are fair and legitimate."

These reflections cheered the youth's spirits; and immediately after dinner he repaired to Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square. He had never been there but once since he and Christina resigned their lodgings in the house; and that once was on the occasion when he and his sister called upon Mrs. Macaulay to inquire whether she could give them any advice towards extricating them from the difficulties wherein they were placed at the time.

Christian knocked at the door, which was speedily opened by Mrs. Macaulay in person: for she had seen him pass her parlour-window. Perceiving that he was well dressed and was evidently in comfortable circumstances, the prudent landlady gave him a hearty welcome,—which she could safely do, as his appearance relieved her of the idea that he was possibly coming to borrow money—in which case she had an excuse in readiness. She would have been extremely sorry—nothing would have given her greater pleasure—but she had only that very morning paid her rent—and what with this disbursement and her Christmas bills, she was drained quite dry. But fortunately Mrs. Macaulay was spared this tissue of falsehoods, inasmuch as Christian came for no money-hunting purpose whatsoever.

"And how *do* you do?" she exclaimed, shaking him by the hand: "and how is that dear sister of your's? I have often and often thought of you, and wondered why you never dropped in to take a friendly cup of tea. I had been thinking that I would call on Mrs. Giles to learn if you were still with her, and how you were getting on: but I have been so busy! For the rooms you used to occupy were let—immediately after you left—to an elderly couple. Though between you and me," she added, lowering her voice to a whisper, and putting on a look of mysterious confidence, "they are no great shakes: for Mr. Johnson—that's the name—locks up his wine and brandy; and Mrs. Johnson never by any accident leaves the key in the tea-caddy. Now isn't *that* mean?"

While thus speaking, Mrs. Macaulay had led the way into her parlour; and Christian, in order to avoid the necessity of giving an answer to the question with which she had so indignantly concluded her speech, inquired if Mr. Redcliffe was at home.

"No—but he will be in almost directly," replied Mrs. Macaulay. "Do sit down and take a glass of wine."

"No, I thank you—not in the middle of the day."

"Well, and you are quite right," exclaimed the landlady. "Never drink wine in the middle of the day—I never do—unless it is at a neighbour's, or a lodger happens to leave a drop at the bottom of a bottle. Not that the Johnsons do! No—bless you! they even decant their Port down to

the very dregs: and *that*, you know, is so excessively mean! But what do you want with Mr. Redcliffe?"

"I met him about a week ago," answered Christian; "and he desired me to call upon him."

"He is a very excellent man, though eccentric," resumed Mrs. Macaulay. "I never had a better lodger. Whatever is left cold, he seems entirely to forget; and never asks to have it up. Now *that* is what I like! His maxim is evidently, '*Live and let live*:'—and so it should be. He gives very little trouble, and is a man of the fewest possible words that I ever knew. He receives no visitors, and likes to be alone. The other evening it struck me that he might possibly be dull——I recollect I had nothing in the house for my own supper that particular evening—— However, that is not to the point. But at nine o'clock, when *his* supper-tray went up, I followed; and I said in the politest manner, 'Really, Mr. Redcliffe, I can't bear to know that you are always sitting alone; and I thought perhaps you would only deem it an act of courtesy if I just stepped up to have half-an-hour's chat with you.'—But no! he assured me that he preferred being alone, and that he could not think of taking me away from my own domestic avocations. Well, I was obliged to leave him to eat his supper all by himself; and it was so provoking!—for I had put on my best cap and gown on purpose, and had made myself look so smart! But isn't he an odd man?"

Christian could have said, if he had liked, that he really did not see anything so particularly odd in Mr. Redcliffe's conduct on the occasion referred to: but he did not choose to wound Mrs. Macaulay's feelings; and so he evaded the necessity of giving a direct reply by observing, "He is a very charitable and generous-hearted man."

"Perhaps then he has done something for you?" exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay quickly.

"No—it was not necessary," rejoined Christian, —"at least not when I met him a week ago. Previously to then—as you are indeed somewhat aware—I and my poor sister had to encounter severe troubles: but the tide of ill fortune suddenly changed—and on the same day we both obtained situations—Christina as companion to Lady Octavian Meredith, and I as private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont."

"Dear me, dear me!" ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay: "to think of your good luck! You had really better take a glass of wine after your walk —and a nice bit of cake? And if my lodgings should happen to become vacant, you will have such opportunities, you know, to recommend them to a Member of Parliament!—and you can speak an excellent word in my favour: for you recollect how good I always was to you both."

Christian certainly must have been troubled with a very short memory at the time: for he could not recollect any particular boon conferred upon himself and his sister by Mrs. Macaulay—unless indeed it were the recommendation to Mr. Samuel Emanuel, which however well-meant, had nevertheless entailed upon his sister nothing but insult. As she continued to press the refreshment of wine and cake—both, be it understood, having descended from Mr. Redcliffe's apartments —he again declined the offer, but with a becoming courtesy.

"And so you are secretary to a Duke?" she exclaimed, surveying Christian with as much admiration as if he were some rare animal just brought over from distant parts and lodged in the Zoological Gardens; "and you must therefore sit alone with his Grace for hours and hours. Well, I never spoke to a Duke in my life; and I don't think I ever saw a live one—at least not to my knowledge. But I saw a dead Duke once. It was in Edinburgh—during poor dear Mr. Macaulay's time: for to tell you the truth, he was an undertaker—and I went with him when he measured the body for the coffin. And your sister is companion to Lady Octavian Meredith?—and I suppose her ladyship makes much of your dear Christina? Well, I am delighted to find that you have got on so well in the world. You will make your fortunes. Ah! I never shall forget how I cried that time when you came and told me how Mr. Emanuel acted. I didn't choose to shed tears in your presence, because I was afraid it would dispirit you both: but when you were gone, I sat down and *did* have a good cry—and that's the truth of it. Dear me, to think of those Emanuels! Why, I knew Samuel Emanuel when he was an orange-boy, selling his fruit to the passengers that went off by the coaches from the *White Horse*, Piccadilly. Then he took to selling knives with twenty-four blades—not one of which, between you and me, would even cut so much as your nail. Next I found Mr. Samuel Emanuel going about with a bag at his back, and heaven only knows how many hats piled up on the top of his head: so that he looked like a walking stack of chimneys with a number of black chimney-pots stuck one above the other. Next I remember him standing in front of a little, poking, beggarly, second-hand clothes' shop in Holywell Street,—his wife a dirty drab, looking all greasy and oily—and his children playing in the gutter. Then he moved to his present house, which has grown by rapid degrees into——what does he call it? Oh, an Emporium! And now he rides in his carriage; and I suppose that if I happened to meet his wife, I must curtsy to her. Ah, what a world this is!"

And then, as if almost overcome by the feelings which this pathetic moral reflection conjured up, Mrs. Macaulay moved in an abstracted manner towards her cupboard—where she poured out and drank off the glass of wine which she had so recently been pressing upon Christian. At this moment there was a double knock at the front door; and the worthy woman exclaimed, as she wiped her lips, "There's Mr. Redcliffe!"

A few minutes afterwards Christian was seated with that gentleman in the apartment on the first floor. Redcliffe received him in the kindest manner: but being a man of very few words, except when it was necessary to speak at length, he soon gave the youth an opportunity of explaining the motive of his visit. Christian told him all that had passed between the Duke of Marchmont and Mr. Armytage: and Redcliffe listened in silence to the narrative.

"I hope, sir," said the youth, in conclusion, "that you will not think I have done wrong in listening to that discourse?"

"By no means, my young friend," responded Redcliffe. "We may consider ourselves to be en-

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gaged in warfare on behalf of an oppressed lady; and we must not hesitate to avail ourselves of whatsoever weapons accident may put in our hands."

"That is precisely the view which I took of the matter!" exclaimed Christian, delighted that there should be such an identity of thought on the part of himself and Clement Redcliffe. "Ah, by the bye, I forgot to mention something," he cried, as a recollection struck him. "Twice during the conversation did the Duke of Marchmont address Mr. Armytage by the name of Travers."

"Travers?" said Mr. Redcliffe.

"Yes—and it would appear," continued Christian, "that this was the name which Mr. Armytage formerly bore, when he was not so high up in the world."

Mr. Redcliffe reflected profoundly for some minutes; and at length he said, with an abruptness which he often displayed, "No, Christian Ashton—you have *not* done wrong in listening to what took place with those persons. Continue to watch the Duke's movements—gather up whatsoever you may hear passing around you at Marchmont House—store all words and facts in your memory, no matter how trivial they may at the moment appear—and from time to time make your report to me. Rest assured that we will baffle the conspirators, and that the injured Duchess shall issue triumphant from amidst the perils which environ her. You will then have done a noble deed; and for whatsoever trouble it may have cost you, you will experience an ample reward in the luxury of your own feelings."

"Rest assured, sir," answered Christian, "that I shall follow your advice in all things. Ah! I ought to have mentioned that it is rumoured in the household that we are all going down to the Duke's Hampshire estate of Oaklands in a few days—to remain there until the opening of Parliament in February."

"And perhaps Mr. Stanhope will be of the party," observed Redcliffe. "This is no doubt a portion of the plot—a cunning device for the purpose of throwing the villain Stanhope and the Duchess more frequently together. You must let me know when the day of departure is fixed."

"Ah, sir," Christian remarked, "the name of Oaklands must be memorable in the Marchmont family, and ominous for the welfare of the Duchess!"

"What do you mean?" inquired Redcliffe.

"Have you never heard, sir, of the dreadful tragedy which took place there, about eighteen years ago, and in which the name of a Duchess of Marchmont was so painfully mixed up? I was reading about it the other evening——"

"But we must take care," said Redcliffe, with that abruptness which we have before noticed as being to a certain degree characteristic of him, "that another Duchess shall not be painfully associated with the name of Oaklands. Now go, my young friend—I have business to attend to—letters to write."

Mr. Redcliffe shook Christian warmly by the hand; and the youth thereupon took his departure.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE EMPTY HOUSE.

EVERY day since the night of the fearful murder at the Smedleys' abode, either Bill Scott or his brother passed two or three times along Cambridge Terrace in the Regent's Park, and looked up at a particular house: but on each occasion the observer went away with the air of one who continued to be disappointed in something that he expected to take place. At length, one morning, Bill Scott beheld placards in the windows of that particular house, announcing that the stock of furniture was to be disposed of on the following day, according to the orders of the official assignee in the case of the bankruptcy of Joseph Preston. Bill Scott hastened homeward, and imparted this intelligence to the Burker.

"That's right, my boy," said Barnes, who was smoking a pipe and discussing a pot of porter at the time; "I knowed the bills couldn't be werry long afore they was posted up. But you're sûre that you and your brother hav'n't dropped a word to them Smedleys about my setting you to watch that partickler house?"

"We hav'n't seen nuffin of the Smedleys ever since the business of t'other night," was Bill Scott's response; "and so we couldn't ha' talked if so be we had wished to do it—which we didn't."

"You are clever chaps, both of you," said the Burker approvingly—though the younger of his two adjutants was not present at the time to receive and acknowledge the compliment. "What a blessed thing it is for you fellers to have a chap like me which is as good as a father to you. When I think that I spent five pounds to give you each a bran new suit of toggery—bought second-hand at an old clothes' shop—for you to turn out swell on Sundays, I'm lost in admiration at my own generosity."

"But you make us stick to the rags, though, during the week-days," observed Bill Scott, glancing somewhat sullenly down at his dirty and tattered attire.

"Well, and don't *I* stick to *my* own seedy togs during the week?" demanded the Burker, indignantly: and then, as if to compose his feelings, he imbibed half the contents of the pewter pot,—having done which, he handed the vessel to Bill Scott. "I tell you what it is, young feller—if we was all three to turn out every day into Swell Street, it would regularly spile us for useful work. There's no gammon about the business: we hav'n't the gentility of cut that makes a chap fit for the swell-mob. So we must continue to work, on as we does. Look how I have blowed your hides out with good things ever since that affair of last week: I hav'n't stinted my share of the blunt, I hope. Coffee, hot rolls, and black-puddings for breakfast—roast weal or pork, or else biled beef, carrots, and taters, from the slap-bang shop for dinner—sassengers or eel-pies, and baked taters, for supper—with no end of malt and blue-ruin by way of lush. Now that's what I call living; and if the Lord Mayor and all his Aldermen can beat it, then I'm a Dutchman—which I werry well know I ain't, 'cos why my father was a out-an'-

out true-bred Englishman. Ah, Bill—he was a highly respectable man—he was. I've a right to be proud of his name, and I rewere his memory. He was in the priggin line for a matter ot forty year—wisited foreign parts for the good of his country—and died there. Ah, he knowed what Botany Bay and Norfolk Island was. I tell yer what, Bill—he was like the monkey that had seen the world which you read of in the fable-book."

"And who was your mother?" asked Bill Scott. "I never heerd you speak a word about her."

"Well, she was respectable in her way too," answered the Burker, when he had refilled and lighted his pipe. "She took in washing and stolen goods; and the latter was a precious sight more lucrative than the former. When my father got lagged—which in plain English he did—so it cost him nuffin, you understand, to go abroad and see the world——"

"Well, when he was lagged—what then?" asked Bill Scott.

"Why, my mother took on so that what with gin and grief she turned up her toes one fine morning; and the parish was so uncommon kind and had such a respect for her memory, that it purvided her with a funeral free gratis for nuffin. But my grandfather—*he* was the chap, Bill! He could turn his hand to anythink. I've heerd my father sit for hours and speak in admiration of his father afore him. *That* was the great Mr. Barnes, that was—the pride of the family! He was a horse-stealer."

"And a werry good thing too," said Bill Scott.

"Yes—but that warn't all. He was a coiner into the bargain," continued Barney the Burker, as he thus eulogized his ancestors: "and what's more, he was the smasher of his own manufactured blunt. When times was bad in that way, and the markets got glutted with base coin, he took to another perfession. That was thimble-rigging; and he thought nuffin of making his ten pun' note in a day at a country fair or market, or on a race-course. And then he was a perfect genelman in his habits—went to bed drunk every night of his life as reglar as clock-work."

"And how did *he* end?" asked Bill Scott.

"As a genelman should," responded the Burker: "he went out of this life in the least possible space of time when St. Sepulchre's clock struck eight one serene morning in May; and he didn't struggle more than half a minute as he danced on nuffin in the presence of five thousand genelmen and ladies which had collected together to do him honour. Now that's what I call being a great man; and I may be excoosed if I appear rayther wain of that ancestor of mine, the great Mr. Barnes."

"Ah, I should rayther think so," said Bill Scott admiringly.

"Why, you see," continued the Burker, as he smoked his pipe in a leisurely manner, "it's the natur' of human beings to be proud ot their ancestors. Wasn't we reading in a weekly paper t'other day that there's some great Dukes—I forget their names again—which is as proud as peacocks cos why their great, great, great grandmothers was what they call ladies of easy wirtue in the time of King Charles. So with the glorious example of the airistocracy afore my eyes, I may be allowed, I hope, to have a nat'ral pride in my own ancestors."

"To be sure!" said Bill Scott, approvingly; "but perhaps you will tell me why you've sent either me or Tim every day for the last week up into the Regent's Park to have a look whether the furnitur' is still in that there house, or whether there's bills up to say it's all to be sold by auction."

"Cos why it come to my knowledge—never mind how," answered the Burker, "that the chap which used to live in that house was made a bankrupt some time ago; and so I knowed wery well that as the things wasn't yet sold off, they would be soon—and that's the reason I set you fellers to watch and see."

"Well, but what has all that got to do with you?" asked Bill Scott. "I suppose *you* ain't a-going to take the house and set up in business as a genelman."

"No—I ain't a-going to retire from my perfession yet awhile," answered the Burker. "I hav'n't made my fortune."

"But you got a jolly lot of swag t'other night, though," observed the youthful thief,—"a matter of a hundred and twenty pounds for yourself. Them Smedleys ought to have let me and Tim go shears."

"Not a bit on't!" said the Burker sternly. "You wos only sarving an apprenticeship on that particklar night; and we ought to thank the Smedleys and old Mother Webber that they didn't make me fork out summut on your account as a premium on your indenturs'."

"Now, do you know what I would have done if I'd been you?" asked Bill Scott, after a pause.

"How can I know unless you tell me. What?"

"I'd have kept the whole of that there swag for myself," returned the youth with dogged dryness: "I'd have stuck to the blunt, s'elp me tater!"

"Then you would have done a thing which would have kivered you with shame and disgrace," rejoined the Burker, with a tone and look of surly indignation. "Hav'n't you larnt that werry excellent maxim, '*Honour amung thieves.*' If not, I had better punch it into your great thick head at once:"—and Barney looked very much as if he intended to suit the action to the word.

"Come, none of that!" exclaimed Scott, shrinking back in terror at the ferocious ruffian. "I didn't mean no harm."

"Then don't go for to start such immoral notions again," said Mr. Barnes sternly: and contenting himself with this warning, he spared his youthful and delectable pupil the punching process that had been menaced.

"You hav'n't told me what you mean to do about that there house on Cambridge Terrace," said Bill Scott, after another pause.

"And what's more, I don't mean to tell you," answered the Burker. "It's a little private business of my own; and you had better not go and blab about it—or I should precious soon sarve you as I did that chap down at the Smedleys' t'other night. You and Tim can amuse yourselves with cards or dominoes and a pot of porter after supper to-morrow night, till I come home: for I des say I shall have to be out an hour or two. You have

had a week's holiday; and you and Tim must get to business to-morrow. The blunt I got t'other night won't last for ever; and we must make hay while the sun shines."

It is not however necessary to record any more of the conversation which took place, on this particular occasion, between Barney the Burker and his worthy pupil: for we must pass on to the narration of other matters.

On the following day the sale took place at the house which Joseph Preston had inhabited on Cambridge Terrace; and by eight o'clock in the evening all the "lots" were cleared away, according to the terms duly specified in the catalogue—of which Barney the Burker had obtained a copy, so that he might judge whether the house would be left empty after the sale.

It was between ten and eleven o'clock at night, that the ruffian issued from his lodgings—where he left the brothers Scott engaged in the manner which he had sketched forth on the preceding day. Barnes directed his steps towards the Regent's Park; and on arriving in the vicinage of Cambridge Terrace, he carefully scrutinized all the windows of the house where the sale had been. No lights were to be seen anywhere in the front; and Barney, passing round to the back of the Terrace, examined the premises from that point. The result was the same: not a single light was visible in any of the windows. A bill was posted against the stable-doors; and by the light of an adjacent lamp, Barney was enabled to read the large print thereof. It announced that the house was to be let on lease, applications to be made to an auctioneer in Albany Street, or else to the official assignee under Joseph Preston's bankruptcy.

"That's all right," said the Burker to himself: "applications isn't to be made upon the premises—and that's a sign there's nobody left in charge of 'em. Sharp feller, that assignee! If once you puts a man and his wife into a house to show it, and lets 'em live there free gratis for nothin' until it's let, I'm blowed if it will ever let at all. They are sure to stall off the ladies and genelmen as comes to look at it, by saying the dreanage is bad. That's a rule as inwariable as a judge pumping up his tears when he sentences a feller to death."

While making these very intellectual and erudite reflections, Barney the Burker was slowly passing away from the vicinage of the stables, in order that he might have another look at the front part of the house, so as fully to make up his mind as to the particular point in which he should attempt an entry: for such was the object he had in view. It did not however appear very safe to operate on the front, because the shadow of a policeman was descried at the farther end of the Terrace, and carriages were ever and anon proceeding in both directions, probably on account of *soirées* or parties being given at some of the adjacent dwellings. But on the other hand, the Burker had an almost equal objection to the attempt of a forcible entry by the rear of the premises; inasmuch as belated grooms connected with the adjoining stables, might be about. So Barney went and took a walk in some secluded portion of the Regent's Park, to reflect upon the most prudential course to be pursued under existing circumstances, and likewise to while away the time until a later hour, when the carriages should have ceased to roll and the belated grooms should have retired to rest.

The church clock in Albany Street had proclaimed the hour of one in the morning, as Barney the Burker retraced his way to the rear of the premises, where he had decided upon making the attempt. The coast was clear; and a small crowbar, dexterously as well as powerfully used, speedily forced open the door of the coach-house. Entering that place, he carefully closed and bolted the door behind him. One of his capacious pockets furnished a dark lantern: this was quickly lighted by means of matches, with which he was also provided; and he now took a survey of the premises. The stables were behind the coach-house; and thence there was no means of ingress to the yard or little garden, whichever it might be, in the rear of the empty house itself. He ascended a ladder into the upper storey, which he found to be divided into two compartments—one serving as a hay-loft, the other as a chamber for a groom or a coachman; and in this chamber there was a window looking into the yard which lay between the stabling-premises and the back of the house itself.

The dark lantern was re-consigned to the Burker's pocket: he carefully and noiselessly opened the window; and by means of a rope which he likewise had with him, lowered himself down into the yard. Creeping cautiously along the shade of the wall which separated that yard from the adjoining one,—so that no light from the back windows of the neighbouring dwellings should reveal his form to any one who might chance to be looking forth from his bed-chamber,—Barnes reached the back door of the house; and this he opened by means of his crowbar, with but little difficulty and loss of time. He was now inside the house: his entry had been successfully and rapidly accomplished. He listened with suspended breath: for notwithstanding the inference he had so shrewdly drawn from the announcements of the printed placard, he knew it was still within the range of possibility that there might be some person left in charge of the premises. But all appeared to be as silent as the tomb.

"Let me see!" thought the Burker to himself: "the front bed-room on the second floor. Them was the words."

He accordingly began to ascend the staircase in as noiseless a manner as possible,—pausing every now and then to assure himself that all continued still. In a few minutes he reached the particular room which he sought: but we should observe that from time to time he drew forth his dark lantern and threw the light around for a moment, so as to make himself thoroughly aware of the topography of the premises.

The house was completely denuded of all its furniture; and occasionally the naked boards of the staircases and the landings creaked beneath the Burker's tread. Still no other sounds reached his ears; and he felt tolerably well assured that he was the only human being at that moment inside the building. He reached, as we have said, the chamber which he sought: again his lantern was produced—but he was cautious where he threw the light, for fear lest it should be observed outside by the policeman on his beat. The shutters were however closed; and thus there was less danger of

the rays penetrating forth. Barney held the lantern low down, and in such a manner that its light fell only upon the floor. Then he counted the boards from the left-hand side, until he had numbered *eleven:* and there he stopped. Drawing a bradawl from his pocket, he stuck it as deep into the wood as the force of his hand could drive it without making any noise; and it served as a handle to lift up the plank, which was previously so firm and secure in its setting that no one, by merely treading over it, would by its oscillation or yielding have been led to suspect it was thus moveable. The crossbeams formed so many different recesses; and these the Burker examined one after the other. But his countenance grew more and more blank—or rather expressive of a sullen, savage disappointment, as he found nothing.

"Well, I'm blowed," he said to himself, "if this isn't odd! One of three things must have happened. Either the chap lied in his letter—or else the Smedleys have been aforehand with me—or else the men which conducted the sale must have twigged the secret of the plank and got possession of what I'm searching arter."

But still fancying that he might have overlooked the object for which he had come, and which had cost him so much trouble, the Burker made a more careful scrutiny of the various recesses revealed by the extracted plank. Into each recess did he throw the light of his lantern: he thrust his hand in, and felt as far as he could reach on either side underneath the boards which still remained fastened down. For more than a quarter of an hour was he thus engaged: but he found nothing. With a low but terrible imprecation, he was compelled to give up the search; and without taking the trouble to restore the plank to its place, he issued from the chamber.

Descending the stairs as noiselessly as he had mounted them, he reached the hall; and on arriving there, he took out his lantern to throw a light around—for he had forgotten the precise geography of the place.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, as the beams fell upon the front door; "this *is* precious odd!"

The Burker's surprise may be accounted for, when we inform the reader that the lantern had suddenly made him aware that the chain of the front door was hanging down, and that the lock had been wrenched off. He examined the door still more carefully; the bolts were drawn back—and it was only kept closed by the tightness with which it fitted into its setting.

"It's as clear as daylight," said the Burker to himself, with a deep concentration of fierce and savage feeling, "that some folks has been aforehand with me:—and who could it be if not them Smedleys? Well, if this isn't a dirty shabby trick, I'm blowed!"

The respectable Mr. Barnes did not reflect that he on his side had been all along endeavouring to outwit the Smedleys in the object for which he himself had come—or at least that he had kept his design altogether secret from them. He considered himself deeply wronged; and hence that expression of his injured feelings.

"But how the deuce did they get in?" he said to himself, perfectly bewildered. "That they went out of this here door—if it was raly them—is as plain as a pikestaff: but how *did* they get in first of all? They didn't force the door. The lock was broke off by some one inside, where I'm standing now. Ah, I can guess!" he ejaculated to himself, as a sudden light flashed in unto his mind. "They must have hid theirselves inside the house arter the sale—perhaps in the coal-cellar, or what not. A deuced clever trick, by jingo! But I will see if I can't be even with them yet."

His angry feelings were the least thing appeased by the resolution to which he had just arrived; and returning the dark lantern to his pocket, he issued forth from the front door, closing it behind him by the aid of the brass handle—and hurried away, unseen by a single soul.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TWO NEIGHBOURING HOUSES.

In one of the finest streets at the West-end of the town—but the name of which we suppress for reasons which will be presently obvious—there are an elegant milliner's establishment and a handsome tailor's shop next door to each other. The two houses, which are lofty, spacious, and of imposing appearance, belong to an uniform range,—the white fronts and large windows of which, as well as the general style of architecture, produce the impression which is conveyed by the best streets of Paris.

Through the immense panes of plate glass in the milliner's shop, may be seen an exquisite and elegant assortment of caps, bonnets, laces, veils, ribands, silks, &c.; and the *facia* over the shop-front indicates that the establishment belongs to Madame Angelique. The same name is repeated, but in miniature letters, on a brass-plate on the shop-door. The exterior would lead the passer-by to imagine that a respectable as well as a thriving business is carried on by Madame Angelique; and everything seems to be done to render the appearance of the shop as imposing and as attractive as possible. Nowhere are the windows more transparently clean—nowhere the paint fresher—nowhere the brass-work on the lower part of the window and on the door so brilliantly resplendent. If you enter the establishment, the impression produced by the exterior is sustained and confirmed. The shelves are arranged with neat drab-coloured pasteboard boxes, edged with pink, and which are speedily taken down to display their exquisite contents of laces or costly silks—their caps or their gloves—their trimmings or artificial flowers, to the eyes of customers. The mahogany counter is scrupulously burnished: the chairs have crimson cushions; and in the evening the shop is a blaze of gas-light. Sometimes it is Madame Angelique herself who attends upon her lady-customers: at other times it is a genteel-looking deputy of a certain age, and who speaks French with the finest Parisian accent, but English with scarcely any describable accent at all. A glass-door at the extremity of the spacious shop, frequently stands half-open, and reveals some dozen of work-women in a large room comfortably furnished, and where dresses are made up or caps and bonnets trimmed. A

very handsome circular staircase, with bronze balustrades, and carpeted all over, leads up into the show-rooms, which occupy the whole of the first floor. These are sumptuously furnished: lustres, vases, and *or-molu* clocks embellish the marble mantel-pieces, and are reflected in the immense mirrors with their massive gilt frames. Splendid chandeliers, all of the finest cut glass, hang to the ceiling; and these at dusk are lighted with wax-candles, which flood the apartments with as brilliant a lustre as that which prevails in a West-end saloon when a banquet or ball is given. The carpets in the show-rooms are so thick that the delicate feet of lady-visitresses are completely lost in them: the patterns are of the richest description, and match well with the deep crimson paper of the walls and the general style of the furniture. The costliest as well as the most elegant dresses are to be seen in these apartments; and whichever way a visitress may turn, she finds her form reflected either in a mirror against the wall, or in an immense oval psyche. There are few chairs in these rooms—but numbers of sumptuous ottomans, covered with velvet, are ranged around. These ottomans are so many large chests or boxes, the lids of which are made to lift up, cushion and all; and from the mysterious depths of the interior Madame Angelique or the show-women produce the newest elegancies of Parisian fashion—such as bonnets, caps, and materials for ladies' dresses.

The show-women themselves are middle-aged persons, but dressed with the utmost taste and neatness—of affable and obliging manners—and bearing the stamp of unquestionable respectability. Neither in the shop down stairs, nor in the show-rooms, are any of the females very young or very good-looking: so that if a somewhat particular lady, or an uxorious husband accompanying his wife, pay a visit to Madame Angelique's establishment, nothing meets the eye to induce a suspicion as to its perfect propriety. We should add that the young women themselves in the work-room, seemed to have been chosen as much for their absence of personal charms as, we may suppose, for their skilfulness with the needle; and perhaps the door of communication between that room and the shop is intentionally left open, to convince such straight-laced lady or particular husband accompanying his wife, as those whom we have alluded to, that in every possible department of Madame Angelique's business the females employed are of modest demeanour, as well as of an age and appearance which may defy the breath of scandal.

But then, Madame Angelique's house is a very large one; and there are floors higher than the show-rooms. Most of Madame Angelique's customers know that she is a widow, and that only two or three of her principal dependants live on the premises. What, then, does she do with all the upper part of her spacious house? If occasionally some curious old dowager or ingenuous young lady happens to put the question, Madame Angelique, with one of her most amiable smiles, speaks of the immense stock of goods which she is constantly compelled to keep on hand—and thus promptly attributes a use and a purpose to all the up-stairs rooms which are not occupied by herself, her principal women, and her domestics. In short, the establishment of which we are speaking, has the appearance and the general reputation of being one of the most respectable, as it is assuredly one of the most fashionable and best frequented, *Magasins des Modes* to be found at the West End of London.

Before we pass away to a description of her neighbour's, we must say a few words of Madame Angelique herself. She is about fifty years of age—of a comely and matronly appearance. She is a French woman—as her name, her manners, and her speech indicate. Somewhat stout, she is nevertheless bustling and active; and she thinks no trouble too great to bestow upon a customer. Indeed, her bearing is as urbane, her smile as complacent, and the expressions of her gratitude as great, towards a lady who merely drops in to buy a three-and-sixpenny riband or a half-guinea cap, as they are to another customer who leaves behind an order for a twenty-guinea dress. There is nothing obtrusive in her politeness: it is measured to the utmost nicety. She will only press her goods to a certain point—and no farther: she will expatiate upon how much this or that article is sure to become the complexion of the particular customer with whom she is treating at the time—but she will not too persuasively force the said articles upon such customer. Thus she gives universal satisfaction; and as for her bills, she only sends them in once a-year—about three months after Christmas—remaining perfectly satisfied if they be liquidated any time before the ensuing Christmas. It were almost needless to add that she herself dresses with the most unexceptionable taste,—in a manner becoming her years, with the slightest dash of a Parisian coquetry—but yet so far removed from being *outré* that it is impossible to make her look ridiculous. She uses rouge and pearl-powder with so much skill, that only those ladies who are equally skilful in the mysteries of the toilet, could discern how much her complexion is indebted to those accessories; and her smile reveals so admirable a set of teeth, that even the wearers of false ones themselves would find it difficult to attribute Madame Angelique's to the succedaneous art of a renowned dentist in the same street.

The tailor's shop next door is as handsome in its own way as the *Magasin* of Madame Angelique. It is the establishment of no cheap clothier: none of the exquisitely fashioned articles of raiment displayed in the window, are vulgarized by ticketed prices. M. Bertin—for the tailor is a Frenchman, as Madame Angelique is a Frenchwoman—would scorn the idea of selling pantaloons at sixteen shillings, surtouts at two guineas, and paletots at two ten. No suit of clothes is sent out from his establishment under seven guineas. His name is in gilt letters over the shop-front—in brass letters ingeniously stuck on to the middle pane of plate-glass—and repeated on a brass-plate on the shop-door. Everything looks business-like and respectable—yes, and wealthy also, at M. Bertin's; and if a passer-by glances up at the windows on the drawing-room or higher floors, he beholds rich draperies and the tops of gilt back chairs, all indicative of the sumptuous interior of M. Bertin's habitation. As for M. Bertin himself, he is a short, middle-aged man—very active and very obsequious—tolerably good-looking for his years—exquisitely dressed—making a large display

of watch-chain festooning over his waistcoat—of diamond studs to the cambric front of his shirt—and of rings upon his fingers. He speaks English tolerably well, but with a strong accent; and as he is amassing a fortune in this country, he loves it ten thousand times better than his own.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening that the Duke of Marchmont strolled into M. Bertin's shop,—which, as well as his neighbour's, was brilliantly lighted with gas; and after exchanging a few words of little moment with the foreman who was behind the counter, his Grace passed through a side door into the private passage. He ascended the staircase with the air of one who was perfectly well acquainted with the geography of the premises, and who felt himself perfectly at home in this proceeding. Mounting to the second floor, he tapped gently at a door, which was immediately opened by a middle-aged and discreet-looking female domestic.

"The young ladies there, Annette?" inquired the Duke, with a significant glance thrown across the room into which the door opened.

"Yes, my lord," was the woman's response.

"Disengaged?"

"Yes, my lord."

Without another word, Annette led the way across the room, which was handsomely furnished—and advanced straight up to a large mirror which seemed to be suspended in the usual manner against the solid wall, though reaching down to the carpet. It was however in reality a door, which opened by means of a secret spring; and the woman tapped at what appeared to be the back part of a closet thus revealed. That woodwork against which she knocked, was speedily opened in the form of another door: the woman stood aside—and the Duke passed in to the place whither these singular and mysterious means of communication led. A beautiful girl, elegantly dressed, held that inner door open to afford the Duke admission; and when he had entered, she closed it again. It was an immense mirror, suspended like the one in the room from which he had emerged; and when the door which it formed was shut, no one, unless in the secret, could have possibly entertained the slightest suspicion that it was a door at all.

The reader has perhaps by this time comprehended that the Duke of Marchmont had passed from the tailor's house into the milliner's: or if there be any such reader so obtuse of intellect as not to comprehend this fact, we now beg to announce it. Yes—his Grace of Marchmont was in one of the higher rooms of Madame Augelique's abode. It was splendidly furnished—with mirrors, draperies, pictures, and statues. But these were the least attractions there, in comparison with four lovely beings in female shape, who seemed to be the presiding deities of this luxurious apartment. One had opened the mysterious door, as already stated, to give the Duke admission. She was a fine, well-grown, and exceedingly handsome young woman, of about two-and-twenty. Her glossy brown hair was arranged in bands, with an artificial flower like a camelia on one side of the head. Her dress, of fawn-coloured satin, was made very low in the body, revealing a gorgeous bust: the richest lace trimmed the upper part of the corsage, both back and front; and ribands depended from the shoulders. Her arms were bare: and splendid arms they were,—a trifle too robust perhaps for statue-like symmetry—but plump, well rounded, and dazzlingly white. This young woman was a native of England; and she was known to the Duke of Marchmont, as well as perhaps to others, by the Christian name of Lettice—this being short for Letitia.

The second divinity of the place whom we must notice, was a French girl, named Armantine, and who was of ravishing loveliness. Her features were delicately formed and faultlessly regular. Her hair, a shade darker than the English girl's, was arranged in a sort of Greek knot; and it shone with a rich gloss, all its own. She too was elegantly apparelled,—the light satin dress setting off the slender symmetry of her shape, and revealing much of the well-formed bust, which was less exuberant and more statuesque than the voluptuous contours of Miss Lettice.

The third female occupant of the room was a German girl, with masses of rich auburn hair clustering down upon her brilliantly white neck and shoulders. She too was eminently beautiful—but with a sensuously outlined profile, and large languishing blue eyes. Her figure combined slenderness of shape with rich development of contours. Of the four she alone had not her arms bare:—not that she had any reason to conceal them on account of defective modelling: it was simply a matter of taste that she wore the elegant Parisian sleeves which at that time had just come into fashion. This German beauty was known to the Duke of Marchmont by the Christian name of Linda.

The fourth was a charming Irish girl, with mischievous eyes and piquant features,—the dewy lips expressive of much feeling, and the form combining elegance of symmetry with lithe and willowy grace. She answered to the name of Eveleen. And now we may add, in respect to all four, that they possessed teeth white as pearls; and that in this respect, if an apple of discord had been thrown amongst them, no Trojan umpire could have honestly and conscientiously awarded it to any one in particular. In short, Lettice, Armantine, Linda, and Eveleen, were assuredly four of the loveliest specimens of the female sex that could possibly be found grouped together in the same apartment.

That the Duke of Marchmont was no stranger to them, was evident by the manner in which they greeted him on his arrival. The restraint which his rank might elsewhere have imposed, was here altogether lost sight of,—as will be seen from the way in which the young females respectively addressed him.

"Is it you, my dear Marchmont?" exclaimed Lettice, the English woman, as she gave him admittance by means of the mysterious mirror-contrived doorway: and she spoke in a rich flute-like voice, which seemed quite appropriate to the fine, well-developed, and imposing style of her beauty.

"That wicked Marchmont, who always makes me drink so much champagne!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Armantine, who spoke English with only just so much of a foreign accent as to render it interesting when floating on her soft silvery tones.

"It is just why Marchmont *is* welcome," said Linda, the German girl, who also spoke English well: "because he is sure to give us champagne."

"Hold your tongues, you selfish creatures!" cried Eveleen, the Irish girl, with that interesting intonation of voice which gives such a peculiar charm to the Hibernian accent upon the lip of a well-bred daughter of the Emerald Isle. "Let us welcome him in another way:"—and with sportive joyousness she wound her arms about the Duke's neck, at the same time kissing him upon either cheek.

"Oh, if that is the sort of welcome you have in store for me," said Marchmont, "pray let it be given at once."

Thereupon Miss Lettice folded him in her embrace: Mademoiselle Armantine was the next to dispense her caresses; and though the German girl came last, yet she held him longest in her arms.

"And now my fair ones," exclaimed the Duke, laughing with the air of a man who purposely sought this kind of society for the purpose of escaping from more serious, and perhaps unpleasant reflections—"let us have champagne and fruit, and we will pass a merry evening together. But first of all I must have a few words with Madame Angelique—and in private too. I have something of importance to speak to her about."

"You know where to find her," said Lettice: "she is in her own room at this moment. Go quick, Marchmont—and if you remain too long, we will all four come in a body, armed with champagne-bottles, and with forced fruit as missiles, to drive you back as our captive."

"Chains of festooning flowers should not be omitted from the implements of your coercion," answered the Duke, forcing himself to speak in a gay manner: though, as he opened a door opposite the mysteriously contrived mirror, he could scarcely keep back a sigh which rose up into his very throat.

Closing the door behind him, he traversed the well carpeted passage, and tapped at another door on the same storey. The well-known voice of Madame Angelique bade him enter; and he found her seated at table with none other than her neighbour M. Bertin. There was an exquisite supper upon the table,—a repast consisting of succulent French delicacies, served up on silver plate, and flanked with bottles of champagne, Burgundy, and Bordeaux. The room was a small one—but furnished in the most luxurious manner. It was Madame's boudoir; and a door facing the one by which the Duke had entered, communicated with her bed-chamber. M. Bertin rose and bowed obsequiously: but Madame Angelique contented herself with a half-courteous, half-familiar smile,—at the same time indicating a chair.

"I am sorry to disturb you, my dear madam, in the midst of so agreeable a *tête-à-tête*," said the Duke, speaking in the French tongue, with which he was perfectly conversant: "but I have some business of importance to discuss with you. Shall I return presently?"

"By no means, my lord," answered Madame Angelique, in a most gracious manner: for she doubtless well knew that the Duke's gold would indemnify her well for any little inconvenience she might experience on the score of the delicacies of the supper-table getting cold.

"And it just happens," said the discreet and obsequious M. Bertin, "that I have a couple of letters to write——"

"Which need not take you more than a quarter of an hour," observed the Duke,—thus indicating the interval that he wished the tailor to remain absent from the milliner's boudoir.

M. Bertin bowed and withdrew: but so far from returning into his own house, or having any letters at all to write, he merely lounged away the prescribed quarter of an hour in an adjoining room. Meanwhile let us see what took place between the Duke of Marchmont and Madame Angelique.

"I believe, my excellent friend," said his Grace, "that you make all my wife's dresses?"

"I have for some years enjoyed the honour of her Grace's patronage," was the milliner's response.

"And mine too, for that matter," exclaimed the Duke, with a laugh. "But joking apart, have you made any dresses for her Grace recently?"

"At this very moment, my lord," answered Madame Angelique, "I have three or four in hand for the Duchess of Marchmont."

"Good!" ejaculated the Duke. "Of course you can make duplicates?"

"Make duplicates, my lord!" cried the milliner, with a most genuine amazement.

"To be sure. Why not?"

"Oh!—of course, if your Grace wishes it, I could make a dozen of precisely the same sort."

"Never mind the dozen," rejoined Marchmont: "a duplicate of each will answer all my purpose. But recollect, the work must be so well done and the resemblances so exact, that her Grace's own maid, if appealed to upon the subject, could not possibly suspect that there were duplicates of her mistress's raiment."

"All this can be done, my lord," replied Madame Angelique: "and without for a single moment attempting to pry impertinently into your Grace's reasons and objects, pardon me for expressing a hope that no evil consequences will redound to myself?"

"I will take care of that," answered the Duke. "When will these dresses be ready?"

"Her Grace tells me, my lord, that you are all going into the country the day after to-morrow; and the dresses which her Grace has ordered, must consequently be sent home to-morrow night."

"And when can the counterparts be in readiness?" inquired Marchmont.

"It will take a good week, my lord——"

"A week?—nonsense!" ejaculated Marchmont.

"I cannot possibly get them done in less time. Say on the sixth evening hence," added Madame Angelique, after a little reflection.

"Very good," replied the Duke: "that must suffice."

"They shall be positively at Marchmont House by nine o'clock on the day named——"

"No—you must not send them direct to Marchmont House," exclaimed the Duke: "that will never do! There must be no trace——But how can it be managed?"

"Shall I forward the dresses in a box to Oaklands, my lord?" asked the milliner.

"A box so light as that will be with nothing but woman's trumpery in it, would seem suspicious

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if addressed to me. And then, too, it is absolutely necessary for my purpose that there should exist no possible clue——Ah, I recollect, I have an unsophisticated, unsuspicious, docile, and obedient young man in my service. Let me see?—this is Wednesday. Well, on Tuesday evening next, at nine o'clock, this young man shall be in a cab at the door; and you must have the dresses delivered to him in a box by one of your most confidential women."

"They are all confidential, my lord," responded Madame Angelique; "or else I should not have been able to sustain my establishment unsuspected as I have done for so many years?"

"Well, let this be the arrangement, then," resumed Marchmont. "At the hour and on the evening just agreed to, the name of Christian Ashton will be sent in to you; and you will know what it means. But mind! *he* is not to know what the dresses are."

"Decidedly not, my lord," exclaimed the milliner. "Your Grace's commands shall be followed in every respect. Has your Grace any farther instructions?"

"Yes—there is one thing more," proceeded the Duke. "You will have to spare Lettice Rodney for a short time. I need her services. Do you consent? You know very well that you will be paid handsomely for all that you do to serve me."

"Your Grace can command in my house as well as if it were your own," responded Madame Angelique.

"Good," said Marchmont. "Then I will make my own arrangements with Lettice. You are convinced that she is perfectly trustworthy—that she is one to whom may be confided a task of no ordinary importance? Remember, she will be well paid, as you yourself will be——"

"I can rely upon her," exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Has she not been with me since she was fifteen?—does she not regard me as her own mother?—have I not done everything for her?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" ejaculated the Duke. "But I have often wondered what the deuce you do with the girls when they begin to fade away and are wearing out."

"I give them money and send them abroad," answered the milliner. "Ah, your Grace little thinks how many I have supplied to a house in Paris. Change of air soon brings them round a bit; and they go on well for a few years in France, until at length they get down into the streets and end by dying in the hospitals. But what else can they expect?"

"What else indeed?" said the Duke: and with this heartless assent to the vile woman's observation, he rose from his seat.

"By the bye, my lord," cried Madame Angelique, beckoning his Grace towards her with an air of mysterious confidence, "I have found out such an extraordinary thing. One of my spies—and your Grace knows that I always have several upon the look-out——"

"Well, what is it?" asked the Duke. "Something new in the female line?"

"Something new indeed, my lord—if it is possible to get hold of them by any sort of inveigling——"

"*Them?*" cried the Duke. "You speak of more than one."

"I speak of two, my lord," answered Madame Angelique. "It is just this:—In a certain suburb of London there lives an Eastern lady of the most ravishing beauty; and she has in her household a Hindoo woman as grandly handsome as herself, though of a different style. I have seen them both. They ride out occasionally in a carriage in their own neighbourhood: though for the most part they live quietly and unostentatiously—and what on earth they are doing in England, I cannot tell. The worst of it is, there are English servants in the establishment——"

"The best of it, you mean!" ejaculated the Duke; "because you can easily bribe those English servants to your purposes."

"I fear not, my lord. My confidential agent," continued Madame Angelique, "who first told me of these rare Oriental exotics, endeavoured to sound the steward or butler, or whatever he is; and he met with such a cold reception that it would not do to attempt anything farther through those means. Not that I despair of getting these Orientals by some means or another into my power; only of course I should run a great risk——"

"Which is as much as to give me to understand," interrupted Marchmont, with a smile, "that the reward must be commensurate. Well, my dear Madame Angelique, do not speak a syllable upon this subject to any others of your patrons: but prosecute your inquiries—prepare your plans—spread your nets—and wait till I return from Oaklands. You know that I can be liberal——"

"Your Grace's commands in this respect, as in all others, shall be paramount with me."

"Ah, by the bye," said the Duke, "I had better give you a trifle on account of the affair of the dresses. How much have you there?" he asked, as he tossed a handful of bank-notes into the milliner's lap.

"Two hundred pounds exactly, my lord," was the response. "My best gratitude——"

"Oh, never mind the gratitude," cried Marchmont. "And now good night. I am going to pass a few hours with the young ladies: I have ordered champagne and other refreshments——"

"Splendid forced fruit from Covent Garden today, my lord," said Madame Angelique. "Melons—pine-apples—grapes——"

"Well, send up all you have got. And now I hope you will amuse yourself with our worthy friend Bertin, who is discretion personified. I am sure if it were not for you two, I don't know what gentlemen and ladies having pretty little intrigues to carry on, could possibly do."

"Well, my lord, I do flatter myself that neighbour Bertin and I carry on the business with a discretion that is unparalleled. But then," continued the milliner, "so long as we have such excellent patrons as your Grace, we are rewarded for our trouble and anxiety."

The Duke smiled at the thought of Madame Angelique's anxiety as he glanced at the well-spread table; and nodding her a familiar good night, he quitted the room. Returning to the luxuriously furnished apartment where he had left the four young ladies, he found a table spread with all kinds of wine, fruits, and other light re-

freshments. Nothing could be more sensuously refined than everything which met his view. The apartment flooded with light—the rich furniture—the crimson draperies—the brilliant mirrors—the wine sparkling in the decanters—the fruit in the dishes of cut glass and in china baskets—and the ravishing loveliness of the four young women who were to be his companions at the festival,—all combined to elevate his spirits and win him away from certain sombre reflections which had been hanging upon his soul ere he sought the present scene. The atmosphere of the apartment was warm and perfumed, but without a sickly oppressiveness: the brilliant light was reflected in the eyes of the four charmers—it made their teeth gleam like pearls—their lips have the vivid semblance of wet coral: it displayed the dazzling transparency of their complexions to the utmost advantage—it shed a richer gloss on their naturally shining hair.

"Come, my dear Marchmont," said Lettice, "and let me sit on one side of you."

"And I," said the young Irish girl, "on the other."

"But Marchmont loves to be at his ease," cried the sprightly Armantine: and she bounded from the room,—in a few minutes returning with a costly flowered silk dressing-gown, the production of which elicited peals of merry laughter from herself and her companions.

"Come," said Linda, the German girl, "off with the coat and on with the dressing-gown! It makes you look so much as if you felt yourself at home."

"Have your own way," said the Duke. "And now to table, you merry romps."

They sat down: the champagne quickly began to circulate—laughter pealed like silver bells around—the Duke felt himself gay—he forgot whatsoever cares had been troubling him—he plunged headlong as it were into the vortex of pleasure, in order to drown his recollections. Be it understood that the young women were not merely well educated, but accomplished likewise. They had belonged to genteel families, from whose bosom they were beguiled away by the infamous agents of the still more infamous Madame Augelique; and if there were at any time remorseful feelings in their souls, they were compelled to stifle them as well as they could; for they felt that they had entered upon a career whence there was no retrogression. But they were accomplished, we say: they all had good conversational powers—and the discourse became as sparkling as the wine which gave it zest. After a while, when the whole party were exhilarated, they got up and danced; and the Duke abandoned himself with a sort of wild frenzy to the hilarious proceeding. Were he a youth of eighteen or twenty, he could not have entered more completely into this fun and frolic. At length, when exhausted with waltzing and romping, he threw himself upon a chair; and the champagne-glasses were filled again.

"Long live such gaiety as our's!" cried Marchmont, lifting up his glass in one hand, while the other arm encircled the splendid shape of the gorgeously handsome Lettice.

"Oh, for ever such gaiety as this!" exclaimed Linda, who had likewise thrown herself upon a seat: and as she held her glass up, she watched the sparkling of the wine ere she conveyed it to her sensuously breathing lips.

"That wicked Marchmont has whirled me round so," cried the Irish girl, "that he has tired me out!"—and she threw herself upon a footstool.

"Moisten your lips with fruit," said Armantine, as she sped to the table; and quickly returning with a china basket containing melon, pine-apple, oranges, apples, pears, and grapes, she placed it on the carpet at the Duke's feet.

Then, likewise seating herself upon a footstool, she listened while Marchmont and Lettice sang together a Bacchanalian English song. What a scene of luxurious enjoyment, blended with the ravishments of feminine beauty, was that for the pencil of an artist!

It was past one in the morning when Marchmont thought of taking his departure. He placed under one of the fruit-dishes a sum of money in bank-notes, as a mark of his liberality towards the charming companions of his revel; and then he drew Lettice aside into a window-recess, where he conversed with her for a few minutes in a low tone of voice. The other three girls chatted together at the opposite extremity of the room: they heard not what passed between Marchmont and Lettice Rodney—neither did they seek to catch a single word. They were all on the friendliest terms with one another: they had no jealousy. Their exquisite beauty ensured to them all an equal amount of favour on the part of their aristocratic patrons; and being girls of good education—feeling too at times their lost and degraded position, they knew how useless it was to aggravate it by petty contentions amongst themselves.

The conversation between the Duke and Lettice terminated: the nobleman embraced all four one after another, and then took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVII.

COVENT GARDEN.

On the following day Christian Ashton was engaged, as usual, in the forenoon, attending to his ducal employer's correspondence; and when it was terminated, he rose to withdraw from the library; but Marchmont said, "Sit down again, Christian: I wish to speak to you."

The youth resumed his chair, and prepared to listen attentively to whatsoever might be addressed to him.

"I think, Christian," continued his Grace, "that you are happy and comfortable in your present situation—and that inasmuch as your welfare is looked after by me, you yourself are willing and anxious to give me every possible satisfaction."

"It is my duty, so long as I eat your Grace's bread," responded the youth—thus avoiding the necessity of telling a falsehood by the assertion that he *was* happy in the Duke's employment.

"I expected no less from your lips," continued Marchmont. "There is a little service which you will have to render me. To-morrow I go with her Grace to Oaklands: but you will not follow until the early part of next week. You will thus have a little holiday, and plenty of opportunities to see your charming sister. Next Tuesday night at

nine o'clock you will take a cab and repair to a particular address, which is written on this card," —at the same time presenting one. "You will merely knock at the door and send in your own name. A large box will be given to you, of which you must take particular care. It contains things which I design as presents; and the truth is I wish to surprise those for whom the gifts are destined: — hence this little degree of mystery which I am observing on the point. You will leave London by the first coach on Wednesday morning; and you will bring the box amongst your own luggage. Put upon it a card with your own name; and when you arrive at Oaklands, let it be taken up, together with your other boxes, to the chamber which will be allotted to you there. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, my lord," responded Christian.

"And you will see the necessity of keeping the matter profoundly secret," rejoined the Duke: "because, as I tell you, I mean to divert myself a little with the distribution of the presents which the box contains. I know that I can rely on your discretion and fidelity. Mr. Calvert will provide you with the requisite funds for your travelling expenses; and you must be sure to arrive at Oaklands in the course of next Wednesday."

Christian bowed, and quitted the library. Sallying forth, he proceeded at once to Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, and communicated to Mr. Redcliffe everything that had just taken place between himself and the Duke. The address of the house at which he had to call, was Madame Angelique's; and Christian having purposely passed it by in his walk up to Mrs. Macaulay's, was enabled to report that it was a milliner's establishment. Neither Redcliffe nor himself for a moment believed that Marchmont's explanation of certain intended gifts, was otherwise than a pretext for some ulterior design: but what this design might be, young Ashton could not for the life of him conjecture—while Mr. Redcliffe volunteered no surmise.

"You must perform exactly, my young friend," he said, "the mission that is entrusted to you: but upon obtaining possession of the box, come direct hither to me before you take it to Marchmont House. I may then tell you how we will act. Besides, it is necessary that I should see you again ere your departure for Oaklands."

Christian promised to fulfil Mr. Redcliffe's instructions; and took his leave of this gentleman. He stepped into Mrs. Macaulay's parlour to shake hands with the widow,—who bade him be sure and not forget to bring his sister to take a friendly cup of tea with her on the first convenient evening. He was about to depart, when Mrs. Macaulay beckoned him back, and in a tone of mysterious confidence, she said, "By the bye, I remember I have got a little party on Saturday evening; and it's on rather a memorable occasion. The fact is, I and Mrs. Sifkin have not been on speaking terms with each other for the last ten years. Not that it was any fault of mine, you know; because I am quite incapable of giving offence even to a worm—much less a human being that walks upright on two legs. It was all owing to jealousy on Mrs. Sifkin's part. However she has made overtures through Mrs. Dumpling—a lady in the same street. She lets lodgings too, does Mrs. Dumpling; and between you and me, wretched apartments they are! You wouldn't believe it, my dear Mr. Ashton," added Mrs. Macaulay, in a voice of awful mystery: "no—you never would believe it!—but it is as true as I am a living woman!"

"What's true!" asked Christian.

"Bugs, my young friend—bugs, I can assure you!" replied Mrs. Macaulay. "Nothing should induce me to say such a thing of a neighbour, if it wasn't the case. If they were fleas only—but bugs——dreadful!

"Dreadful indeed!" muttered Christian, with a sensation as if something disagreeable were creeping over him under his clothes.

"However," proceeded Mrs. Macaulay, "barring the bugs, Mrs. Dumpling is a very excellent neighbour, and a kind-hearted woman—though she does give nothing but that odious currant wine of her's and captain's biscuits, with may-be a stale tart or two, for supper when she has a little party. Still she *is* a good woman; and she went right across yesterday morning to Mrs. Sifkin, and told her her mind about her conduct towards me. I dare say that Mrs. Dumpling did come out rather strong, because I know that she had had a *leetle* drop of brandy beforehand——in fact, it was out of a bottle that Mr. Redcliffe, poor dear soul! sent down from his room——However the long and short of it was that Mrs. Sifkin confessed the errors of her ways; and Mrs. Dumpling proposed that if Mrs. Sifkin would send me over an apology through her, I would give a party to clinch the reconciliation and celebrate the event. So I mean to do the thing nicely, and give a pretty spread on Saturday evening; and if you and your dear sister will favour me with your company, I shall be delighted."

"I cannot say how my sister may be engaged," answered Christian; "and I do not for a moment think that she will be enabled to accept your kind invitation. But as for myself, I say *yes* with much pleasure."

"And you will be welcome," said Mrs. Macaulay. "But pray do bring your dear sister, if she can possibly manage to come."

Christian bade the woman good-bye, and hastened on to the Regent's Park to see Christina. He had not the least intention of bringing her in contact either with the amiable Mrs. Sifkin, or with Mrs. Dumpling who had bugs in her lodgings: but he had accepted the invitation for himself, not only because he fancied that he might be dull at Marchmont House while the family was away—but also because he had some little curiosity to see how the rival lodging-house keepers would get on together.

It was about two in the afternoon of the following day, that Mr. Redcliffe—enveloped in his cloak as usual, and with his hat more or less slouched over his countenance—walked slowly down that fashionable street in which the adjoining establishments of Madame Angelique and M. Bertin were situated. Having well surveyed the milliner's premises—or rather their exterior,—Redcliffe continued his way; and if the thoughts which were passing in his mind, were reduced to words, they would have taken some such shape as the following:—

"The establishment seems respectable enough:

but yet the fairest exterior often veils the foulest corruptions. There is some deep mystery in connexion with that box which is to come next Tuesday night from this house; and I must fathom it. Every incident, however trivial it may appear, is to me of momentous import. Who knows how it may serve as a link in that chain which I am endeavouring to follow up? The link may not for the moment seem to fit: but it must not on this account be discarded. Who can tell but that it will sooner or later find its appropriate place and help me on to the accomplishment of my aim?"

While thus meditating, Clement Redcliffe pursued his way—at first without perceiving the direction he was taking, and without any specific object in view. But suddenly he bethought himself of a poor invalid old man whose case had become known to him in his wanderings about the metropolis, and whose last few weeks in this life he was soothing with that quiet unostentatious benevolence which he was wont to afford. The medical man whose services his purse had provided for this invalid, had recommended certain little delicacies, cooling fruits, and so forth; and Redcliffe now continued his way towards Covent Garden Market, to make such purchases as under the circumstances he thought would be acceptable. Arrived in the arcade, his charitable intentions were speedily carried out: and on quitting the fruiterer's shop, he strolled up to the terrace on the roof of the market, where flowers are exhibited. Redcliffe was passionately fond of contemplating floral rarities,—a taste which was natural with his refined intelligence, and which had been strengthened by his long residence in an oriental clime.

He was entering one of the conservatories, when he stepped back with a sudden sense of intrusion upon two individuals who were standing there in deep and earnest conversation,—a conversation so absorbing that they did not notice his presence. One was a lady the very first glance at whose appearance was sufficient to impress the beholder with an idea of rank and distinction. She was dressed with that simple elegance and exquisite refinement of taste which characterized the well-bred woman. The consciousness of high birth and the dignity of position blended sweetly and harmoniously with the perfect loveliness of her countenance and the flowing outlines of her symmetrical shape. Her features, perfect in their profile, had that classic sculptural finish which is so seldom seen: she was a creature of a magnificent beauty—a beauty that fascinated more than it dazzled, and enthralled the soul more than it bewildered the imagination. Her age was about three-and-twenty: she was tall, with a shape of full developed contours, and yet faultlessly symmetrical in the tapering slenderness of the waist. Her hair was of the richest auburn, flowing in glossy lustrous tresses from beneath the elegant Parisian bonnet. Her eyes, of the clearest blue, were large and darkly fringed—the brows delicately pencilled and beautifully arched. One hand had the glove off;—a small white delicate hand it was too; and one of the tapering fingers wore the wedding-ring.

Her companion, who held that beautiful hand tenderly pressed between both his own, was a young man of perfect masculine beauty. He might have been about her own age; and his appearance indicated a distinguished position, as we have already said that her's likewise did. But that he was not her husband, Clement Redcliffe saw at a glance: for though they were unconscious of his presence, yet there was something evidently stealthy in their meeting at that place. No husband would have held her hand as he did: no wife in the presence of a husband would have worn that expression which was visible in her deep blue brooding eyes, and in the passion-breathing lips, which, slightly apart, afforded a glimpse of the pearls within. And he was speaking in a low murmuring voice, but with a tender persuasiveness of the look—as if he were pleading a cause whose only argument was love, and to which she could not yield with honour to herself. The rising and sinking of the shawl folded over her full and swelling bust, denoted the agitation which reigned in her heart: though she stood otherwise perfectly still and motionless, with that fair white hand abandoned to her lover, and with the colour coming and going rapidly upon her beautiful damask cheeks.

Such was the spectacle which Clement Redcliffe beheld almost at the first glance—or at least within the few moments which he lingered upon the threshold of the conservatory. The man who had charge thereof, was attending to a customer at a little distance on the terrace: that tender pair evidently thought themselves altogether alone and unperceived,—snatching perhaps the quick stolen interview of a few minutes—but these few minutes constituting a period in which a whole world of heart's feelings became mutually expressed. Redcliffe caught the words, "Madame Angelique" and "M. Bertin," amidst the otherwise inaudible murmurings of the young man's voice,—inaudible however only to him: for the lady was evidently drinking in with mingled hope and fear—love's passion and alarm—every syllable that came from her companion's lips. Redcliffe turned abruptly away: but glancing through the glass of the conservatory, he saw that the tender couple still remained in precisely the same position—and that so far from their being startled by that movement on his part, his presence had continued utterly unperceived.

"That scene is but too intelligible," he thought to himself, as he proceeded to the conservatory at the other end of the terrace. "There is a young wife not yet lost, but hovering upon the very verge of perdition,—her love getting the better of her sense of duty—the enamoured tempter's persuasiveness proving stronger than her prudence. Would that I dared step between them to save her, and strengthen that lingering virtue which required so much tender pleading on his part to have its last barriers broken down! But no: it is not for me to intervene. There are good deeds which a philanthropist would fain perform—but which, as the world goes, he dares not even approach."

Then it struck Redcliffe as singular that at a moment when he had so little expected to hear it, the name of Madame Angelique should have been mentioned, and coupled too with that of the very person whom he had ere now noticed to be her neighbour. Was it possible that the young man was proposing an assignation, for the carrying out

of which the milliner's and the tailor's establishments might be rendered available? Redcliffe was shrewd and intelligent: his experience of the world was too large not to enable him to draw rapid inferences from certain circumstances; and the question which he had just asked himself in respect to the lovers' assignation, became a conviction in his mind. He descended from the terrace, and passed slowly along the arcade lined with those shops where the choicest fruits of English gardens and hothouses, as well as of tropical produce, are so profusely displayed. In a few minutes the lady whom he had seen in the conservatory, passed him by. He at once recognised her by her dress: he glanced at her countenance, and saw that though calm to the superficial observer, yet that it was an assumed and unnatural serenity which to the experienced eye veiled not the agitation that lay beneath. A tall footman in a superb livery, and carrying a gold-headed cane, was lounging in the arcade: but the instant he beheld the beautiful lady approaching, he accosted her with a respectful salutation.

"Has the fruit been sent to the carriage?" she inquired: and Redcliffe, who heard what passed, perceived that there was a clouded tremulousness in her low soft musical voice.

"Yes, my lady," was the response given by the lacquey. "Are there any flowers which your ladyship has ordered?"

"None to-day," was her rejoinder. "I saw not any that pleased my fancy."

No wonder that this titled lady should have forgotten, or else have neglected, her originally proposed purchase of nature's floral beauties: for a sweeter and more delicious flower—love, which is the rose of the soul—had absorbed all her thoughts and engrossed all her time upon the terrace above!

She continued her way through the market, the footman following at a short distance; and when near the end of the arcade, she was suddenly joined by an individual whose almost revolting ugliness formed a perfectly hideous contrast with her own bright and fascinating beauty. He was a man of at least sixty, with large prominent features—a disagreeable and repulsive look; and so totally different from the fair creature who had become the object of Redcliffe's interest, that it was impossible even to believe that he was her father, though more than old enough to claim that title—and very nigh sufficiently so to be her grandfather. His figure was ungainly, and had scarcely the advantages of dress to improve it: for though his raiment was all of the best materials, it nevertheless fitted as if thrown on with a pitchfork. His coat was large and loose—his pantaloons narrow, short, and scanty: and he wore gaiters, which were put on in a slovenly manner. But on the other hand, it was evident that he was very particular and nice with his lavish display of snowy shirt-frill. Such was the individual who joined the lady near that extremity of the arcade which fronts St. Paul's Church.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting," she said, as she took his proffered arm.

"No—certainly not, my angel," he answered, endeavouring to torture his looks and his voice into the tenderest expression of which they were susceptible,—those looks which were so repulsive, and that voice which was so harsh and discordant. "I have been turning over all the books in Willis's shop for the last half-hour, without finding what I wanted. Indeed, I was fearful, my sweetest Emily, that I should keep *you* waiting. And now, are all your purchases sent to the carriage?"

"All," was the response given by the lady; and Redcliffe, who had followed the group, saw the footman hurry on in advance to give a brother-lacquey notice of the approach of their master and mistress; so that the door of the magnificent equipage was ready opened by the time they reached it.

The uxorious old husband—for in this light did he evidently stand towards that young and beautiful lady—handed her in; and when the door closed upon them, he gave the word, "Home!" The two footmen touched their hats, and sprang up behind, each with his gold-headed cane: the stout coachman—who seemed as if having once got on the box, he had grown to it and could never hope to get down again—just suffered the lash of his whip to touch the backs of the two splendid bay horses which were already pawing the ground, impatient of the delay; and off dashed the superb equipage,—Redcliffe perceiving that an Earl's armorial bearings were blazoned on the panels.

He continued his way in deep thought, and returned to that fashionable street in which the neighbouring establishments of Madame Angelique and M. Bertin were situated. By the time he reached that street, the dusk was closing in—for the reader will recollect that it is the month of January of which we are writing;—and both shops were now a blaze of gaslight. It seemed as if Redcliffe's mind were already made up as to the course which he should pursue; for without the slightest hesitation, he at once turned into the tailor's establishment. M. Bertin was behind the counter: and he received Mr. Redcliffe's orders, which were for some new clothes.

"Have the goodness, sir," said the obsequious Bertin, with his politest bowings and scrapings, "to walk this way:"—and he conducted his new customer into a well-furnished back parlour, where he was wont to measure his distinguished patrons.

Redcliffe was exceedingly profuse in the orders which he gave to M. Bertin; and as a matter of course, he said not a syllable on the subject of price. His object was to make as favourable an impression as possible upon the tailor.

"What name and address, sir, shall I have the honour of entering in my book?" asked M. Bertin, when he had finished the measurement of his new customer: and he was all smiles and bows—for the liberality of Redcliffe's order had won the admiration of the mercenary money-loving Frenchman.

Redcliffe gave the necessary particulars—and then added, "Perhaps, as I am a total stranger to you, you will allow me to leave a cheque upon my banker for whatsoever amount you choose to name?"

"Oh, it is by no means necessary, I can assure you, sir!" responded M. Bertin, with continued smilings and bowings. "I feel highly honoured, sir, in having your name upon my books—and

hope long to see it there. Money in advance? Oh, no, sir!—not for the world! Bills sent in every Christmas, sir: those are my terms."

"You will pardon me for having offered you other terms," said Mr. Redcliffe: "but I am comparatively a stranger in England. I have been many, many years abroad——in India," he added, as if quite in a careless manner; although he both foresaw and intended what the effect should be.

"Oh, indeed!—in India, sir!" said M. Bertin, at once catching at the idea that his new customer must be a wealthy nabob. "Ah, sir, fortunes are rapidly made in India."

"Sometimes," observed Redcliffe, still with an air of assumed carelessness—but yet with a sufficient degree of significance to imply that it was so in his own case.

"Not been long in London therefore, I presume, sir?" said M. Bertin.

"No—only a few months," was the response.

"Beg pardon, sir—but married, I suppose?" continued the tailor, who under a show of garrulity, was always thus wont to fathom the affairs and circumstances of new customers so far as they themselves would allow him. "All rich gentlemen returning from India bring beautiful English wives with them; or else they find them at once on setting foot in their native land."

"Neither happens to be my case, M. Bertin," rejoined Redcliffe. "Indeed, I am completely a stranger——"

"Ah, sir, what a pity!" cried the tailor. "Plenty of money, and don't know how to spend it? Beg your pardon, sir—it may seem a very great liberty—but I mean no offence:"—and then as Redcliffe forced his countenance to assume an air of interest in what Bertin was saying to him, the bustling Frenchman closed the parlour door.

"Pray speak candidly," observed Redcliffe: "you need not be afraid of giving me offence. I know that you fashionable tailors at the West End do not always confine your avocations to the mere cutting and fitting of garments—but that you sometimes considerately and kindly help the inexperienced to initiate themselves into the mysteries of London life. Are my ideas correct?"

"Nothing could possibly be more accurate, sir," responded Bertin. "Your name is now upon my books, where I have the honour of chronicling some of the first names of the British aristocracy. Of course, sir, noblemen and gentlemen *will* be gay now and then: but they have a thousand and one reasons for concealing their gaieties as much as possible."

"I understand you, M. Bertin," answered Redcliffe; "and to tell you the truth, I am rejoiced that accident should have led me to enter your establishment. It was the handsome exterior which drew my attention. Ah, by the way, there is an equally handsome establishment next door—I happened casually to notice it——"

"Madame Angelique's, sir. An excellent neighbour of mine:"—and M. Bertin bent a significant look upon Redcliffe.

"Madame Angelique?" said the latter, repeating the name with the air of one who thought he had heard it before. "Surely that name is not altogether unfamiliar to me? Ah, I recollect! At an hotel where I was dining, I overheard two young gentlemen at a neighbouring table, mention that name in a subdued tone. It did not particularly strike me at the time——"

"Very indiscreet of those two young gentlemen, whoever they were—very indiscreet indeed!" said M. Bertin, with a look of annoyance: but instantaneously brightening up again, he added, "Fortunately however their imprudent mention of that name was overheard by a gentleman of honour—a man of the world too—such as I perceive that you are, sir——"

"Oh, I should not think of telling tales out of school, whatever they may be," exclaimed Redcliffe. "But frankly speaking, M. Bertin, I begin to be terribly wearied of the monotony of the existence I am leading; and if, as I think I understand, you have the power of giving me a few suggestions in respect to the means of pleasure-pursuit, I shall not merely be grateful, but shall know how to reward you."

The tailor gazed fixedly upon Redcliffe's countenance for a few moments; and satisfied with the survey, he said, "At any time, sir, that you wish to be introduced into the most charming and agreeable female society, pray favour me with a call. You know what I mean—female society of a certain class—but where intellect and elegance of manners, as well as all drawing-room accomplishments, are blended with the most ravishing personal beauty."

"Not for a moment, M. Bertin, will I affect to misunderstand you," answered Redcliffe. "On the contrary, I *do* understand your meaning; and I shall avail myself of your offer. How will you be engaged this evening?"

"I shall be entirely at your orders, sir," responded the tailor, inwardly chuckling at the idea of having got hold of a wealthy nabob, who beneath a severe exterior, concealed the passions and inclinations of a licentious libertine.

"At nine o'clock I will return to pay you a visit," said Mr. Redcliffe.

"You will find me here, sir," responded Bertin: "and then perhaps," he added, with a significant smile, "you shall know something more of Madame Angelique—or at least of the paradise of houris which is as mysteriously concealed within her establishment, as the happy valley of Rasselas was hidden in the midst of mountains."

Redcliffe smiled—nodded in a friendly way to the tailor—and took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

EVELEEN.

PRECISELY at nine o'clock Mr. Redcliffe returned to the tailor's establishment, and found M. Bertin expecting him. The little Frenchman bowed and scraped in his very best style, when Redcliffe thrust a well filled purse in his hand; and the recipient thought within himself that he was destined to turn a pretty penny by the wealthy Indian nabob.

"I will not insult you, sir," he said, as he conducted Redcliffe into his parlour, "by observing that the strictest honour and secrecy are required in respect to those mysteries into which you are about to be initiated. I flatter myself that I am

rather skilful in forming opinions of persons at a first glance——"

"You need not be afraid, M. Bertin," interrupted Redcliffe, "that I shall go elsewhere to babble of whatsoever I may see at Madame Angelique's."

"To be sure not, sir! You and I know what the world is," rejoined the tailor, with a significant look; "and a gentleman of your travel and experience is well aware that such establishments as these, are of the greatest convenience."

"The greatest convenience, indeed, I have not the slightest doubt!" exclaimed Redcliffe, somewhat drily.

"Have the goodness, sir, to follow me," said M. Bertin: and he forthwith conducted his new patron up the well carpeted staircase, to that room on the second storey where Annette was always in attendance at certain hours for the reception of visitors.

This woman opened the mysterious mirror-contrived door, and tapped at the one inside,—which was speedily unfolded; and Clement Redcliffe passed on into the luxuriously furnished saloon to which the reader has already been introduced. The four young ladies were not however there at the moment: it was Madame Angelique who gave him admittance; and an introduction was effected by the obsequious tailor,—who immediately afterwards withdrew. But while passing by the milliner, he hurriedly whispered, "A purse with a hundred guineas as my fee! Make much of him!"

Madame Angelique closed the mysterious door, having thus received an intimation of Redcliffe's liberality towards her accomplice the tailor, as well as a hint to the effect that she might, by playing her own cards well, feather her nest to her heart's content.

"Have the kindness to follow me, sir," she said, with her most amiable and winning smile, as she opened the door of the apartment.

Redcliffe, purposely assuming as much blandness of manner as he could possibly call to his aid, accompanied Madame Angelique to her own boudoir, to which she led him. She begged him to be seated; and taking a chair near, she began expressing her sense of the honour which she experienced in receiving a patron of whom her friend M. Bertin had spoken so highly. She went on to intimate that as gold was evidently no object to Mr. Redcliffe, she could introduce him to some of the most beautiful creatures in the metropolis—not merely those who were dwelling beneath her own roof, but others with whom she was acquainted and to whom she had access.

"My friend M. Bertin hinted to me this evening previous to your arrival, sir," she continued, "that you have been a long time in India. I know not exactly how your taste may be: but I think that I might possibly introduce you to certain paragons of beauty from that same oriental clime——"

"Indeed!" observed Redcliffe, who was determined to glean as much as he possibly could from Madame Angelique. "I should be delighted—and you have been rightly informed that money is no object to me. But who are these paragons of beauty of whom you speak?"

"Oh! it will be no easy matter to accomplish that business," responded the milliner. "As yet scarcely any steps have been taken: but if I make up my mind to a particular enterprise, I seldom fail in accomplishing it. You must know, sir," continued the infamous woman, "that my noble and generous patrons make it worth my while to furnish all possible rarities and varieties of female charms; and amongst these patrons I hope to include Mr. Redcliffe."

"Most assuredly," was this gentleman's response. "Now I see, my dear madam, that between you and me there need not exist any disguise. I am wealthy—and I am addicted to pleasure. I care not how large a price I pay for it. You understand me."

"I do, Mr. Redcliffe," replied Madame Angelique; "and I thank you for speaking so frankly. It is always better."

"And those oriental beauties?"

"As yet I know nothing more of them than that they *are* beauties," continued the milliner. "One is comparatively fair, of ravishing loveliness: the other is of dusky complexion, and as handsome in countenance and as finely modelled in form as poet ever imagined."

"Indeed!" said Redcliffe. "And where do they live, these oriental houris of your's?"

"Ah, my dear sir," exclaimed Madame Angelique, tapping Redcliffe familiarly on the arm, "I cannot exactly tell you all my little secrets. But you who have been in India, will doubtless appreciate these rarities; and you will not mind a liberal outlay if I introduce you first to one, and afterwards to the other——Of course I mean beneath this roof. Doubtless the task will be a difficult one: there will be stratagem, machination, inveigling, and so forth: but once *here*——you understand me—for their own credit's sake they will not afterwards speak of what has occurred."

"Am I to understand that they live together?" inquired Redcliffe; "because if so, the task will perhaps——"

"Be all the more difficult," Madame Angelique hastened to exclaim,—purposing to exact a price commensurate with the amount of obstacle, real or imaginary, which she might eventually be enabled to boast of having overcome.

"Yes—they live together: the fairer of the two is the mistress—the darker one is the attendant; and it is in a suburb of London that they reside. But more than this you must really not expect to know for the present," added Madame Angelique, with a smile.

"Oh, I will not attempt to penetrate into your secrets, my dear madam," exclaimed Redcliffe. "By all means let me be considered as the one who is to be fortunate enough——"

"It is a bargain, sir," interrupted the milliner; "and shall be fulfilled."

"But," continued Redcliffe, "in whatever steps you may take with regard to these oriental paragons, remember that my name——"

"Good heavens, my dear sir, not for the world!" cried Madame Angelique. "I am discretion personified! Your name shall not be mentioned. I cannot promise that success will be speedily accomplished. As yet I have learnt but little more than the fact of these charming creatures' existence in London. Yes—I have satisfied myself

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that they *are* the beauties they have been represented——"

"But you have not as yet spoken to them?" interjected Redcliffe, as if with a careless manner.

"Oh, no!—they are all but inaccessible, and this constitutes the first difficulty that has to be encountered. Nevertheless, I am not to be frightened by such obstacles. And now, as we are speaking with frankness, Mr. Redcliffe, I must tell you something."

"To be sure—in all frankness," was this gentleman's response.

"You already know," continued Madame Angelique, drawing her chair a little closer towards Redcliffe, and assuming an air of mysterious confidence, "that I enjoy the patronage of some of the highest and wealthiest personages in the realm. By the bye, do you happen to be acquainted—— But no! If I recollect aright, M. Bertin assured me that you are a perfect stranger in London."

"A perfect stranger," replied Redcliffe.

"I was about to observe," continued Madame Angelique, "that to one only of my patrons have I previously mentioned anything concerning these oriental women; and he has charged me to keep them for him. In a word, sir, his Grace——I mean the personage of whom I speak, has promised me no less a sum than a thousand guineas."

"And I, Madame Angelique," exclaimed Redcliffe, "unhesitatingly promise you double the amount, on the mere faith of your representations in respect to the extraordinary beauty of these women. Would you have an earnest of my liberality? It is here:"—and he flung down a bank-note upon the table.

Madame Angelique gracefully inclined her head in acknowledgment of the retaining fee; and glancing rapidly at the note, could scarcely repress a start of surprise and exultation when she saw that it was for five hundred pounds. But instantaneously recovering her self-possession—as she did not choose to suffer her new patron to perceive that, well though she was paid by others, she was nevertheless but little accustomed to a display of such munificence as this—she observed, "It is a compact, Mr. Redcliffe; and not to another soul will I speak of that Indian lady and her dark-eyed Ayah."

"No—there must be the strictest honour in our dealings, Madame Angelique," responded Redcliffe; "and if you play me false, I shall never more set foot in your establishment. But what guarantee have I that you will not suffer me to be forestalled by him to whom you have previously spoken? You ere now let a word drop, showing me that he is a Duke; and how can I possibly hope to compete with a personage of such high rank, and no doubt of such wealth, as his Grace to whom you have alluded?"

"It is all a matter of honour, Mr. Redcliffe," answered Madame Angelique!—"no, not of honour—of self-interest. There! I put it in that light. You will pay me double what the Duke has offered; and the bargain is your's—not his. Besides, the Duke has gone to his country-seat in Hampshire, and will not return till the middle of February. In the meantime we may perhaps bring matters to an issue."

From this discourse Clement Redcliffe had no difficulty in comprehending that the Duke to whom the infamous woman alluded was his Grace of Marchmont.

"Well, Madame Angelique," he said, "I put faith in your words. And now, with your permission——"

"I understand you, sir," she interrupted him, with a meaning smile. "There are at this moment four beautiful young ladies in my house——and by the bye, one of them, a splendid creature, is going down into the neighbourhood of that very Duke's country-seat in the course of a few days. This is between you and me. You will see her presently. Her name is Lettice Rodney."

"By all means, introduce me to your four beauties," observed Redcliffe.

"Have the kindness to follow me, sir. They will doubtless be in the saloon by this time: they were performing their toilet when you arrived."

Thus speaking, Madame Angelique rose from her seat, and led the way out of the boudoir. She conducted Redcliffe to the saloon; and having introduced him to Lettice, Armantine, Linda, and Eveleen, with many smiles and simperings, she retired, closing the door after her. The four girls were as elegantly dressed as when we first presented them to the reader: the table was covered with wines and refreshments—the atmosphere was warm and perfumed—every feature of the scene was but too well calculated to infuse heat into the blood of the coldest anchorite.

But Redcliffe experienced no such fervour. There was a deep sense of disgust in his mind,—a disgust at the gilded iniquities into which he was being initiated—a disgust too at the part which circumstances had led him to perform. He nevertheless assumed the most cheerful air that he could possibly put on. He sat down in the midst of the meretricious group, and at once glided into conversation with them. He soon discovered that they were well-bred, intelligent, and accomplished; and that they were as fully able to converse on intellectual matters as to fritter away the time in vain shallow frivolities. He spoke of his travels in far-off lands—he told them amusing anecdotes—he exerted all his powers to interest them. At first they liked not his aspect; they thought that he was haughty, stern, and severe:—but they soon began to exchange rapid and significant glances amongst themselves, to the effect that they were agreeably disappointed, and that he was a most delightful and entertaining personage. They had already received a hint as to his liberality; and they therefore did their best to appear amiable on their own side.

But all the while Redcliffe was thus conversing with them, he was in reality studying their individual dispositions and characters so far as it was possible for him to do so under circumstances which threw an artificial gloss to a certain extent over them. He had a purpose to carry out; and he required one of these females as an agent. Fain would he have decided upon addressing himself to Lettice, inasmuch as he had learnt that she was shortly to repair into the neighbourhood of the Duke of Marchmont's country-seat: but he saw something in her which forbade the idea of his making this young woman his confidante. He felt assured that she was not to be trusted. Next he studied the German girl, Linda; but he saw

that she was of a sensuous and luxurious temperament, and that she was therefore unfitted for the influences which he purposed to bring to bear upon the one who should be the object of his choice. He directed his attention to the French girl, Armantine: but exquisitely beautiful though she were, and delicately classical as were her features, there was nevertheless a certain flashing of the eyes which denoted insincerity—and his thoughts settled not upon her. There was but one left; and this was Eveleen the Irish girl. There was something ingenuous in her looks — something frank and honest in the expression of her eyes: and then too, he ever and anon observed a cloud gathering over her features at certain anecdotes which he purposely related, and which had the effect of bringing back visions of home to the memories of these lost ones. Eveleen therefore became the object of his choice.

They all sat down at the table; and Mr. Redcliffe in the course of an hour drank more wine than he had altogether done for years past. But this he was compelled to do, lest any suspicion of an ulterior intent should arise in the minds of the three who were to be excluded from his confidence. Nevertheless the libations of champagne clouded not his intellect—much less overpowered it: his own strong will was more powerful than the influence of wine. He made Eveleen sit next to him; and though courteous enough to all four, his principal attentions were devoted to her. This seemed significant; and after a while, Lettice, Linda, and Armantine withdrew from the saloon.

Redcliffe was now alone with Eveleen. She rose and made a movement towards a door at the farther extremity, and which communicated with a voluptuously furnished chamber.

"Resume your seat," said Mr. Redcliffe: "I wish to speak to you."

The girl, who was for a moment astonished that he did not at once rise and follow her, naturally fancied that he wished to prolong the pleasures of the table: and returning to her chair, she was about to refill his glass.

"No—we have had enough wine," said Redcliffe, in a kind though firm and decisive tone.

Eveleen gazed upon him with renewed astonishment; and for a few moments he remained absorbed in thought.

"Tell me," he presently said, "how long have you been here?"

"About three years, sir," she answered; and again the cloud lowered for a moment over her features, which were naturally of so sprightly and piquant an expression.

"Three years," continued Redcliffe mournfully, —"three years of sin for one who by her beauty and her intelligence, her manners and her accomplishments, might have adorned the highest sphere of society, had she remained virtuous!"

"Oh, do not speak to me in this way!" cried Eveleen almost petulantly: for Redcliffe's words, as well as the tone in which they were uttered, had sunk deep down into her very soul.

"It is not a reproach, much less an insult that I am addressing you," he said, in a still kinder voice. "You will perhaps live to bless the day when you thus encountered me—or I have very erroneously read your character and disposition. Tell me—and speak candidly—are there not time when your memory is carried back to a bright and happy home?"

"Good heavens, sir, why do you talk thus?" exclaimed Eveleen. "Who are you? wherefore came you hither? Is it possible——"

"It is possible, my poor girl," responded Redcliffe, "that I may have come hither with some object very different from that which was supposed — very different indeed from the objects which men have in penetrating into such a place as this. But before I explain myself, tell me, Eveleen—have you parents?"

The Irish girl burst into tears: she endeavoured to check them—but vainly: she could not. The more she strove, the less was her power to command her feelings: they convulsed her.

"Yes," resumed Redcliffe, "I see that you have parents, who are doubtless deploring the disappearance of a beloved daughter. Would you not like to be restored to them?"

"Oh, I would give up twenty years of my life to pass but a few in that once happy home!"—and the unfortunate girl sobbed bitterly.

"In me, Eveleen," said Redcliffe, "you shall find a friend—a real friend—a friend who will lift you up from degradation, instead of helping to plunge you farther down—a friend who will do all he can for you—if you yourself be accessible to the influences of such pure and well meant friendship."

By a strange but very natural revulsion of feeling, Eveleen grew calm. She wiped the tears from her eyes, and gazed upon Mr. Redcliffe with mingled amazement, gratitude and admiration. Long was it since her ears had drunk in such language as this: long was it since such balm had been poured down into her heart!

"Do not think," he continued, "that you are so far lost it is not worth while to return into a virtuous course. I am well aware that such is too often the fatal error to which fallen woman clings. She thinks that by the very fact of her fall, insurmountable barriers have suddenly sprung up between herself and the pathway from which she has diverged,—barriers which she may vainly attempt to climb in order to re-enter it. But it is not so. True, when a coronal of purity has fallen from the brow, it can never be replaced!—true, that chastity once lost cannot be regained! But this is no reason for a perseverance in sin; and so great is the merit of abandoning the path of error, that it goes far towards a complete atonement for the past. The arms of parents may be opened to welcome back again a lost daughter, if she return to them in penitence and in sorrow for her misdeeds. Eveleen, you are not deficient in intelligence:—am I not speaking truly?"

The poor Irish girl gave no verbal answer: but she fell upon her knees at Redcliffe's feet—and taking his hand, gazed up at him in a manner which was expressive of a fervid gratitude for the promise he seemed to hold out—of entreaty that he would perform it—but of suspense lest it were a happiness too great for her to know. All the contrition of a Magdalen was in that look. The waters of life had not been dried up in that girl's heart: their issue had been merely closed by the circumstances of her position: but now the rock was smitten with the magic rod which kind words can ever wield; and she felt as for three long years

past she had not felt before! There was a world of sentiment in that look with which she gazed up into Redcliffe's countenance—a look which once beheld, never could be forgotten.

"Rise, my poor girl," he said, profoundly affected. "I see that I have not been deceived in you—and I will be your friend."

"But my parents, sir—Oh, my parents!" exclaimed Eveleen, with an almost suffocating outburst of emotions,—"how will they be brought to receive their dishonoured daughter?"

"If they possess the hearts and the feelings of parents," responded Mr. Redcliffe, "rest assured that you have nothing to fear. I will cheerfully undertake the task of seeing them: I will go to them—I will reason with them—I will entreat them——in a word, if they be not something less or something more than human, I will procure their forgiveness for their daughter, should she be really penitent!"

"My saviour! my deliverer!" cried Eveleen, with another outburst of impassioned feeling: "how can I ever sufficiently thank you? Oh, that I could do anything to testify my gratitude!"

"You can," rejoined Redcliffe.

"I can?" cried the girl, joy animating her countenance. "Oh, tell me but how, sir, and the cheerfulness with which I will obey your commands—the zeal and the fidelity with which I will execute your orders—the unasking devotion and even the very blindness with which I will be guided by your will, shall serve as the first proofs of that contrition whereof I have assured you!"

"Listen then," said Mr. Redcliffe: "listen with a calm attention. You know the Duke of Marchmont?"

"I do, sir," responded Eveleen, a blush mantling upon her cheeks: then in a hesitating voice, she added, "When I was beguiled from my home in Ireland, and brought to this house, it was he to whom I first became a victim!"

"The Duke of Marchmont," continued Redcliffe, "is engaged in certain treacherous pursuits into which it deeply concerns me to obtain an insight. That infamous woman Madame Angelique is his accomplice, or at least his agent. Something is going on wherein she is mixed up. Next Tuesday evening a box is to be fetched away, under circumstances of mystery and precaution, by a young man in the Duke of Marchmont's employment. Have you an opportunity of watching the affairs which progress in this establishment? do you consider it possible to obtain any intelligence, no matter how slight it may be, as to the mystery connected with that box?"

"I will endeavour, sir," responded Eveleen; "rest assured that I will endeavour. Yes," she continued thoughtfully, "I have no doubt I can obtain some insight into what is going on. At all events, be assured, sir, that I will do my best. Oh, I should be so rejoiced to give you a proof of my gratitude—of my penitence!"

"You must remain here for a few days longer," observed Redcliffe. "This is my address:"—and as he thus spoke he gave Eveleen his card. "Come to me on Wednesday morning next, under any circumstances. If in the mean time you should have discovered aught relative to the box, so much the better: but if not, you will come all the same—you shall continue no longer within these walls. Can you leave when you choose? and will you accomplish all that I have suggested?"

"On Wednesday, sir," rejoined Eveleen, "I will be with you:"—and her countenance expressed all the genuine joy which she felt at the prospect of emancipation from a mode of existence which was abhorrent to her.

"Be it so," said Redcliffe. "And now, to keep up appearances, I shall leave money upon this table. Remember, I am putting faith in you—I will prove your friend, if you show yourself worthy of my confidence."

"No power on earth, sir, could induce me to deceive you!" responded Eveleen, with fervour.

Mr. Redcliffe threw a number of bank-notes upon the table; and shaking Eveleen by the hand, he took his departure,—the girl affording him egress by means of the mirror-contrived door. The tailor's female-adjutant Annette was waiting in the room of the adjoining house wherewith that door communicated: Redcliffe slipped a piece of gold into her hand; and in a few minutes he was retracing his way along the street towards his lodgings at Mrs. Macaulay's.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE EARL OF LASCELLES.

We are about to direct the reader's attention to a sumptuously furnished mansion in the neighbourhood of Kensington. It stood in the midst of its own grounds, which were spacious and inclosed with walls. Within that inclosure there were beautiful gardens, which even in this wintry season of which we are writing, presented an aspect of verdure to the eye, on account of the numerous evergreens which were either interspersed about, or which bordered the avenues. Conservatories and hot-houses, containing fruits and plants, also met the view. There were grass-plats too, and pieces of ornamental water; and the entire aspect of the scene—buildings and grounds—indicated the wealth of the possessor.

This mansion belonged to the Earl of Lascelles; and we may at once inform our reader that he was the nobleman whom Redcliffe had seen join his beautiful wife in the Arcade at Covent Garden. The Earl had been married twice. By his first wife he had a son, who was now grown up to man's estate, and who bore the denomination of Lord Osmond. His mother had died some few years previously to the period of which we are writing; and it was only within the last eighteen months that the Earl had espoused his second wife, the beautiful Ethel. This lady, belonging to a good family, had been left an orphan at an early age, and was brought up by an uncle and aunt, who had a large family of their own. Though tolerably well off, they found quite enough to do with their resources; and as Ethel was portionless, she had been constrained by the circumstances of her position, as well as by the earnest persuasion of her relatives, to accept the suit of the Earl of Lascelles, who offered her a title and to make her the sharer of his fortune of sixty thousand a-year. It must

be added that this sacrifice of a young and lovely creature to an old and repulsive-looking man, was not aggravated in its severity by any pre-engagement of Ethel's affections; and it was therefore fortunate for her that in bestowing her hand where it was impossible she could love, she had not to deplore ruined hopes and a withered attachment in any other quarter. She accepted her destiny with as much resignation as possible—and perhaps with more so than if she had been born in a humbler sphere: for in that fashionable world wherein she moved, she had been by no means unaccustomed to contemplate the spectacle of young and beautiful creatures like herself, sacrificed to the selfish and interested views of parents. She did not therefore stand alone in this martyrdom of marriage to which she was made a victim; and there is always a sort of solace in the reflection that one's own lot, however disagreeable, forms not a complete exception to the general rule.

The Earl of Lascelles was however by no means a man, either in person or in disposition, to win the love or esteem of a beautiful and intelligent young lady of Ethel's age. He was attached to her as old men usually are to wives juvenile enough to be their daughters, or indeed their granddaughters: that is to say, he doated upon her with an uxoriousness that displayed itself in a ridiculous manner, even in public; and his assiduities to please her were wearisome and obtrusive. She really had no whims or caprices; but he treated her as if she had a thousand,—constantly heaping gifts upon her which she did not want or could not use. He would buy her shawls of the costliest price and of the gayest colours—jewellery which was totally incompatible with existing fashions and with the peculiar elegance of her own toilet; and then he would be annoyed because she did not wear those things. But if these were his only failings, she needed not much to repine: it was his character generally which was enough to wear out her patience and frequently inspire her with disgust. For the Earl was one of the most consummate boasters and braggarts in all England—and withal too the greatest romancist. We do not mean the reader to infer that he wrote books: nothing of the sort!—his ignorance on all literary matters was deplorable. But we use the term "romancist" as a more courteous expression than that of "liar," which might however be very well and properly applied; inasmuch as his lordship shot with a bow longer than even the greatest of travellers, who are accustomed to tell strange tales, are privileged to use. When quite a young man, he had served in the army, and reached the rank of Captain: but the death of his father, by raising him to the Earldom, led him to abandon the profession. Nothing he loved so much as to sit for hours in Ethel's society and endeavour to amuse her with his exploits when he was a military man, with the wonders he beheld when he travelled abroad, or even with the deeds of his most youthful days; and as she perfectly well understood that he was indulging in a tissue of the most egregious falsehoods, she at times experienced much trouble in concealing her disgust. It was just the same when they had company, or when they visited their friends and acquaintances: he would go on giving utterance to boast after boast—lie after lie—totally inobservant of the smiles of either contemptuous pity or downright scorn which he conjured up to the lips of his listeners. Thus Ethel frequently found herself in a most painful position: for it was bad enough to have a husband so old and so ugly, without the additional annoyance of seeing him rendering himself so supremely ridiculous. When they were alone together, he was continuously lavishing upon her his nauseating caresses: and he would often affect a childish sportiveness—talking nonsense—playing tricks—performing antics—and gambolling as if he were a little fellow of a dozen years old. The Earl's was not therefore a character or a disposition to promote Ethel's happiness, to win her esteem or her love, or to compensate for his own age and his ugliness.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning of the day after Redcliffe's adventures at Madame Angelique's house, that we shall find the Earl of Lascelles seated in his dressing-room, undergoing the process of shaving, which was being performed upon him by his confidential valet. This man was about forty years of age—endowed with a consummate hypocrisy—and who had obtained a complete ascendancy over his master by pandering to his vanity, listening patiently to his stories, and appearing to put the utmost faith in them. His manners were fawning, cringing, and servile: he never contradicted the Earl, but invariably echoed whatsoever his lordship said, and studied to give precisely such an answer as any question that was put might seem framed to elicit. He was bustling, active, and perfectly conversant in all the duties he had to perform. These were multifarious enough; inasmuch as they comprised all the mysteries of his noble master's toilet.

Makepeace—for this was the valet's name (and it was believed to be a feigned one, the particular nomenclature being chosen to give an additionally harmonious gloss to all his assumed attributes),—Makepeace, we say, was at once his lordship's perruquier—his barber—his doctor—and in some sense his tailor. It was Makepeace who dressed his lordship's wig in such a style that his lordship firmly believed the assurance that it looked, if anything, even more natural than his own hair would have done if he had not the misfortune to be bald. It was Makepeace who shaved his lordship so clean that his lordship's finger might pass over his chin without encountering the stubble of a single hair. It was Makepeace who caused to be made up at the chemist's, according to receipts of his own, the medicines which his lordship took to keep him in health and to sustain a juvenescent appearance. It was Makepeace who compounded washes and cosmetics to improve his lordship's complexion, and to keep away pimples. It was Makepeace likewise, who from time to time was closeted in solemn conference with his lordship's tailor, showing where such and such padding ought to be placed:—and yet throughout the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as in the Principality of Wales, or indeed any other part of the Queen's dominions, it would be impossible to discover a worse-dressed man than the Earl of Lascelles. His lordship however thought otherwise: Makepeace persuaded him that it was as he thus thought; and therefore if his lordship were satisfied, nobody else had a right to

find fault. As for the personal appearance of this said Makepeace, we may add that he had naturally a sharp, cunning, hypocritical look,—of which he was perfectly conscious, and which he therefore endeavoured to conceal as much as possible beneath such artificial gloss as the blandest smiles, the most honied speech, and the most obsequious manners could possibly constitute.

It was, then, as we have said, at nine o'clock in the morning that the Earl of Lascelles, having emerged from the bed-chamber in his dressing-gown and slippers, and with his white cotton night-cap on his head, sat down in his elegantly furnished dressing-room to commence the process of the toilet. We should observe that the white cotton night-cap was fringed all around with hair, of precisely the same sort and description as that of which his lordship's wigs were composed; and he actually flattered himself that his beautiful Countess firmly believed he had a fine natural crop of his own hair upon his head. Indeed, Makepeace had assured him that the fringe round the night-cap was a masterpiece of art; and it was quite consistent that Makepeace should say so, inasmuch as the device was of his own invention, and it was a part of his duty to stitch the fringes inside the night-caps when they were delivered to him by the laundry-woman. The dressing-room contained numerous cupboards and chests of drawers, which were always kept carefully locked, —Makepeace retaining the keys, so that none of the other servants should penetrate into the mysteries of those receptacles. Wigs and cosmetics, night-cap fringes and medicines, anti-pimple washes and padded garments, false teeth and whisker-dyes, books for the preservation of health and Guides to the toilet, formed the miscellaneous contents of those drawers and cupboards; and Mr. Makepeace turned, in addition to his handsome salary, a very pretty penny indeed in his capacity of paymaster for all those things on the Earl's behalf.

"How do I look this morning, Makepeace?" inquired the nobleman, as he sat opposite a full-length mirror, with his hair-fringed night-cap on his head, his short shrivelled frame enveloped in a gorgeous French silk dressing-gown, and his feet thrust into red morroco slippers.

"How strange, my lord!" exclaimed the valet, but only in a subdued voice, and in accents most harmoniously bland; "that I should have been just at the very moment thinking I had never seen your lordship look better for the last ten years."

"Is it ten years that you have been with me, Makepeace?" inquired the nobleman, grinning like an antiquated goat at the compliment which his valet paid him.

"Yes, my lord: it is ten years," answered Makepeace, with a profound sigh, which he purposely rendered as audible as possible.

"What makes you sigh?" asked the Earl.

"It is enough to make me sigh, my lord," rejoined the valet, "when I look at myself in the glass, and then look at your lordship. Ten years have made a wonderful alteration in me: but they really seem as if they had passed over your lordship without leaving the slightest influence behind them."

"Hem! I think I wear well," said the nobleman. "Time, you see, is very good to me—he forgets me."

"Considering your lordship is close upon your forty-fifth year," said Makepeace, who knew perfectly well that the Earl would never see sixty again,—"I think your lordship has some little reason to be grateful to Time."

"Well, I think so too. But frankly speaking Makepeace—and I know that you will answer me with your accustomed candour—do I look more than forty-five? Could a close observer have any reason to suspect that I am a day older? Not that I am, you know: but there are men who at my age look as if they were—what shall I say? ——sixty! And then too, that *Peerage* tells such horrid lies. I shall have the author of it brought to the bar of the House of Lords for breach of privilege."

"Let me beseech your lordship to treat the unfortunate man with the contempt he deserves," said Makepeace, assuming an air of humane and philanthropic entreaty. "I dare say he has only put down your lordship so much older than your lordship can possibly be, because your lordship did not send him a cheque for a hundred guineas or so."

"That's the truth of it!" cried the Earl: "so I shall let the rascal alone. Besides, a young man like me—looking even younger, too, on account of the possession of such a youthful and beautiful wife—can afford to laugh at the wretched malignity of a fellow who sets me down at sixty. And I will explain to you how the mistake has arisen—if indeed it be a mistake, and not sheer wickedness. Did I ever tell you at what age I was first married?"

"I think I have heard it said that your lordship was married at fifteen," answered Makepeace.

"Exactly so!" exclaimed the Earl; "and I was a father at sixteen. "But then, you see, I was precocious for my age. Why, I was only sixteen, three months and a half, when I had that terrible encounter with the five highwaymen on Bagshot Heath."

"I have read the account of it, my lord, in an old newspaper," responded Makepeace. "I think, if I remember right, your lordship killed two of them, and led the other three, bound hand and foot, in triumph into Hounslow."

"Those were the very facts of the case," exclaimed the Earl: "I see that you must have read them. I was only seventeen when I cut my way through the French regiment of cuirassieurs—killed the trumpet-major, who was seven feet high —took the colonel prisoner—and carried off the colours."

"That achievement, my lord, is duly recorded in history," answered Makepeace. "It was only the other day I was reading of it in a history of the late war. Your lordship must have been in a dreadful state of excitement after such an exploit?"

"Not a bit of it!" cried the Earl. "I was as cool as a cucumber; and when I got the cuirassieur colonel to the camp, I challenged him——"

"To mortal combat, my lord?"

"No—to a drinking bout. I was terrible in those days for my achievements with the bottle. The colonel had the reputation of drinking more at a sitting than any other man in the French army; but I beat him. We sat down at table,

piling the bottles around us as we emptied them: and we heaped them up so high in a circle round about us, that when the colonel dropped down dead drunk, I got up—as sober as I am now—and had literally to dash down a wall of bottles before I could get out of the place."

"Your lordship's head must have ached very much the next morning?" said Makepeace.

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated the Earl. "I recollect I was up at five o'clock, and rode the celebrated steeple-chase in which I beat the whole field—won the ten thousand guinea stakes—and killed that celebrated horse of mine that was sent me as a present by the Pasha of Egypt for discovering the source of the Nile."

"Your lordship travelled early in life," said Makepeace, with the air of a man who was so deeply interested in his master's exploits that he anxiously sought for farther information.

"Yes—I travelled early," said the Earl, in a complacent and self-satisfied way. "I left college when I was thirteen, and set off on a walking tour through Africa and Asia. Of course I could not manage my tour on the Continent of Europe, because we were at war at the time."

"The deserts of Africa, my lord, must have been unpleasant?" remarked Makepeace, inquiringly.

"Yes—for your milk-and-water travellers, who cannot bear hardships," replied the Earl: "but I cared nothing for them. I caught a wild elephant—tamed him—and rode on his back; so, you see, that it was not altogether a walking tour. I was somewhat troubled with lions and tigers, which swarm as thick as mosquitoes in that country: but I was always on the alert in the day-time; and at night, when I chose to travel—which I chiefly did, on account of the coolness of the night-air—I contrived a portable fire, which the elephant carried with his trunk, and so it frightened off the wild beasts."

"Exceedingly strange, my lord!" exclaimed Makepeace: "but I was reading an account of this remarkable mode of travelling the other day; and as no name was mentioned, I was at a loss to conceive who the traveller could have been. I thank your lordship for the information: it has cleared up the mystery."

"So you see," continued the Earl, "that when I was very young, I encountered a great number of strange adventures. Mine has been an extraordinary life; and for comparatively a young man, I can look back upon a great deal. Did you ever hear of my first speech in the House, when I succeeded to the title?"

"I think I have heard of the wonderful effect it produced, my lord," answered Makepeace.

"Effect, indeed!" ejaculated the nobleman. "It was on a very important subject. Some noble Lord—I forget who he was—brought forward a motion that the Lord Chancellor, who was afraid of an apoplectic fit, should be permitted to sit without his wig. There was a crowded House, and all the first talents displayed themselves on the occasion. It was just going to a division at eleven o'clock at night, when the *Contents* would have carried it: but I, who very well knew that the whole mystery of the British Constitution and the safety of Church and State were involved in the question, rose to say a few words."

"But I dare say they were *not* a few words," interjected Makepeace, with a smirking smile, "which your lordship had to utter on so vital an occasion."

"Well, to confess the truth," answered the Earl, "I did only intend to say a few words: I did not know my own oratorical powers at that time: indeed I scarcely suspected them. But when I found myself on my legs, I was hurried away as if by a tornado. I can compare it to nothing but a perfect hurricane of language, bearing along with it myriads of brilliant stars of metaphor. The very wig of the Chancellor himself—that wig which was the subject of the memorable debate—stood on end. The perspiration ran down my face, so that all my clothes were saturated as if I had plunged into a hot bath: and, by the bye, I found on weighing myself next morning, that I had lost seven pounds of flesh. It was terrific! I began at eleven o'clock; and it was half-past three in the morning when I sat down—the longest debate and the longest speech on record!"

"I need not ask whether your lordship carried the day," observed Makepeace: "for history records the result."

"To be sure! The whole House became *Non-Content* in a moment after I sat down; and the Lord Chancellor never forgave me. It was all through his vindictive machinations that the King did not send for me to be Prime Minister a few months afterwards: but his Majesty wrote me the handsomest apology, explaining how he would rather have me at the head of his councils than any statesman in England, but that he did not dare offend the old Chancellor. I have got the King's letter still: I will show it to you one of these days."

"Her ladyship ought to be very proud of such a husband," observed Makepeace.

"To be sure she ought!—and I believe she is. What is your opinion?"

"It is a delicate subject, my lord," responded the valet with a simulated hesitation: "but still I do happen to know that her ladyship *is* proud of the alliance which she has so happily—and I may add, so gloriously formed."

"Come, tell me, my good fellow, how do you happen to know this?"

"Why, my lord, servants will get talking together—I hope your lordship will not be angry——"

"No, no: I shall look over it. Go on. Perhaps her ladyship's maids——"

"That is exactly what it is, my lord. It was only yesterday they were telling me," continued Makepeace, "how her ladyship speaks to them of your lordship when they are alone together."

"Her ladyship does not suspect, does she——come tell me the truth now—I know you would not deceive me—but does her ladyship suspect anything about *this?*" and the Earl significantly twitched the hair-fringe of his night-cap with his finger and thumb.

"Not for a moment, my lord!" ejaculated Makepeace. "On the contrary, her ladyship was telling her maids the other day——But I am afraid I shall give your lordship offence."

"No, no—I will overlook this little gossiping. I know that it does take place amongst servants. Go on. What did her ladyship say?"

"That your lordship actually looked younger than my Lord Osmond."

"Ah! she said that, did she?" exclaimed the Earl, his wrinkled countenance expanding into one elaborate grin of satisfaction. "You know, Makepeace, there has been a great coolness between me and my son since my marriage. All the estates, as you are aware, are not entailed; and of course I have the power of leaving them to whomsoever I think fit."

"It was very wrong of his lordship," said Makepeace, "if I may be so bold as to offer an opinion—to show any disrespect towards your lordship, because having won the affections of a young and beautiful lady, your lordship chose to consult your own happiness by espousing her ladyship."

"It *was* very wrong!" exclaimed the Earl. "But between you and me, I was not sorry to have an opportunity to forbid my son the house. You see, Makepeace, it is rather an awkward thing where there is a youthful mother-in-law and an equally youthful step-son. The world is so scandalous—and then too, it is always better to be prudent. There is another reason likewise. Lord Osmond looks older than he really is; and it makes me look older in consequence. But as for the former part of my reasoning, her ladyship, you know, is virtue personified."

"If I might be permitted the expression, my lord," answered Makepeace, "her ladyship can only be on this earth by some extraordinary mistake. It is not her sphere, my lord. Her ladyship is an angel."

"Exactly so!" cried the old nobleman. "Don't you think, Makepeace, I ought to be the happiest man in the world?"

"If I were to give free expression to my thoughts, my lord," rejoined the valet, "I should say that this world ought to appear a perfect paradise in your lordship's eyes."

"And so it does, Makepeace—a perfect paradise—an elysium of the most delicious flowers. Give me my wig."

The valet could scarcely suppress a smile for a moment, at the ludicrous transition of his lordship's ideas from the elysium of flowers to his wig: but that smile was not caught by the Earl's eye, as it instantaneously vanished from the countenance of Makepeace.

"Now, I think, I look as I ought to do," said the nobleman whose toilet having progressed during the preceding colloquy, was by this time brought to a termination. "Are you sure that this new peruke does not *look new?*"

"Not at all, my lord," replied Makepeace: "it becomes your lordship admirably."

"And yet it strikes me," said the Earl dubiously, "that it is a shade lighter than the one I have been recently wearing. Put them together, and give me your opinion."

The valet did as he was desired, but purposely held the old wig in such a light against the new one, that the Earl's eye should not detect the difference. The latter was however in reality a shade or two lighter than the former; but Makepeace spoke so confidently in the opposite sense, that his lordship, who took his valet's word to be gospel in all toilet-matters, was satisfied; and assuming as jaunty and debonnair a demeanour as possible, he descended to the breakfast-parlour.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE COUNTESS OF LASCELLES.

Let us now change the scene to another room in the same mansion, and to a much later hour in the day. It was a sumptuously furnished apartment; and the time was two o'clock.

The Countess of Lascelles sat upon a sofa in a thoughtful mood. She was alone; and the perfect immovability of her form and features for a period of several minutes indicated how completely she was absorbed in her reflections. Her exquisitely symmetrical figure was inclined towards the immense velvet-covered cushion on which her elbow rested, the hand supporting the head. The luxuriant tresses of her auburn hair, rich and glossy, floated in natural undulations over her shoulders; and a few straggling curls lay like burnished gold on her pure white throat. Exquisitely beautiful was her countenance, as we have already described it: for she was the lady, as the reader comprehends, whom Clement Redcliffe saw on his visit to Covent Garden Market, and in whose proceedings with the handsome young man he became so much interested. There was a deep pensiveness in her large clear blue eyes; and yet after the lapse of a few minutes, a soft smile appeared upon the roses of the well-cut lips, partially revealing the pearly whiteness of the teeth. It would have been evident to an observer—if one were nigh—that though pensive, her thoughts were not altogether fraught with melancholy, but that there was a roscate light shining softly through.

As she sat half reclining upon that sofa, the dark velvet covering threw out her well-defined and faultlessly symmetrical shape. The voluptuous swell of the bust—the tapering of the waist, which seemed still more slender on account of the luxurious proportions of the bosom—the admirably sloping shoulders—the narrow sleeves, which did not altogether conceal the flowing outlines of the arms—and the sweeping length of the limbs—with two delicate feet peeping from beneath the skirt of the dress—and then, too, one exquisitely modelled hand, fair and white, with its tapering fingers, drooping listlessly and scarcely retaining the snowy cambric kerchief—a glimpse of the other hand amidst the showering masses of her auburn hair,—all constituted a portraiture calculated to ravish the senses of any one who beheld this charming creature.

Still she sat motionless, with her eyes fixed upon vacancy: but her thoughts were evidently busy; and as that soft smile appeared upon her lips, the roseate tint upon her damask cheeks gradually deepened into a crimson blush. Love was the subject of her thoughts—but a love on which it was guilt to ponder; and she knew it. Nevertheless, love—even the guiltiest—has its pleasurable emotions; and vainly may the human heart endeavour to banish the feeling from its tabernacle. As well bid the light of the sun cease to shine in the temple to which it has penetrated—as well bid the moonbeams cease to glance kissingly on the rippling bosom of the ocean—as to bid love withdraw its soft lustre from the sanctuary of the heart into which it has succeeded in gaining

LORD OSMOND.

admission, or to shed its light upon that heart which flutters beneath its influence.

But though Ethel was thus absorbed in reflections on a guilty love, was she herself already guilty? No: the last barrier which separated her from crime, was not yet broken down: she hovered upon the brink of a precipice — but still she hovered: she might yet retreat ere she fell completely over. But would she withstand the temptation? On the one hand there was a husband whom she could not possibly love nor esteem, and whom she could scarcely prevent herself from absolutely detesting. So far as his caresses went, they were loathed as the pawings of an imp would be: his character was despised;—and thus feeble indeed was the difference between the sentiment which Ethel already entertained towards him, and downright abhorrence. On the other hand, there was a young man of her own age—an Adonis of beauty—of elegant appearance—of lofty intelligence—of fascinating manners—and of captivating address. This young man adored her—worshipped the very ground on which she trod—loved her as woman is seldom loved. This she knew—this she felt. Oh, great was the danger in which Ethel Lavecelles stood!

She was in the midst of her reverie, when the door opened; and a footman, entering, said, "If you please, your ladyship, Lord Osmond has called to see the Earl, who is out."

The man's eye did not catch the deepening blush on the cheeks of his mistress at the mention of that young nobleman's name, because her countenance was not immediately turned towards him. With a mighty effort she regained her self-possession; and said in a quiet way, as if influenced by no extraordinary emotion, "Lord Osmond can wait, if he think fit, until the Earl's return."

"His lordship requests an interview with your ladyship," replied the footman. "His lordship bade me say that he has a particular message to be delivered to the Earl; and he hopes your ladyship will not refuse to take charge of it."

Ethel hesitated for a few moments; and then she said, in the same quiet tone as before, "You can show Lord Osmond up."

The footman bowed and retired; and in a few moments the Earl's son was announced.

"Good heavens, what imprudence, Adolphus!" said the Countess, in a tone of half-reproach and half-anxiety, but with ineffable tenderness over all: and her hand too was immediately clasped in Lord Osmond's as those words were spoken when the footman had again retired.

"Imprudence in coming to see you, dearest dearest Ethel!" said the young nobleman, in a voice full of masculine harmony. "Oh, how can you breathe a syllable that seems tinged with reproach?"—and as his fine large hazel eyes looked tenderly down into her's of blue, he kept her fair white hand clasped in his own.

"But your father, Adolphus——my husband," she added, with a deep mournful sigh. "Oh, my God! if he should suspect——And what must he think of your coming hither now?"

"Listen to me, Ethel," responded Lord Osmond, as he led his beautiful mother-in-law to a seat, and placed himself by her side—that mother-in-law who was only just his own age, "I knew that my father was out: I saw him just now alight from the carriage at his club; but he did not observe me. I am well aware that when once amidst those with whom he can gossip after his own fashion, he will not speedily return. I came to the house under the pretext of seeing him: I sent up a message beseeching an audience of you. The servants can suspect nothing; and when my father comes home, you can tell him that I have been here. You can say that I am wearied and distressed on account of the coldness which subsists between him and me—that I seek his forgiveness—that if he will grant it, I am prepared to make any apology for whatsoever offence, real or imaginary, he may have conceived himself to have sustained at my hands——"

"And for what purpose, Adolphus, is all this?" inquired Ethel, with a half frightened look: for though she put the question, she already more than comprehended the young nobleman's purpose.

"Oh, can you ask me?" he exclaimed, in a reproachful tone. "Does not your heart tell you it is in order that we may be together—that I may have frequent opportunities of seeing her who is dearer to me than life itself! Ethel, I shall go mad if all this be not accomplished. Conceive what I have suffered for months and months past—catching only an occasional stolen interview—having to watch your movements in order to be blessed with a few minutes of discourse——And then too," he added, gently and hesitatingly, "you promised a certain thing, and you kept not the appointment. Yesterday I awaited you there—and you came not!"

A burning blush appeared upon the cheeks of the Countess; and her eyes, which swam in the deep languor of tenderness, were bent down as she murmured, "I thought better of it, Adolphus. My guardian angel inspired me with courage; and I resisted the temptation. For heaven's sake, never again propose such a thing!—never again seek to draw me away from that path of duty which I must and will pursue!"

The reader may now comprehend that the appointment which Clement Redcliffe had rightly conjectured to have been given when he beheld the tender pair in discourse on the terrace of Covent Garden Market, was not kept.

"Ethel," resumed the enamoured young nobleman, "my destiny—my life are in your hands. I know as well as you do, all the guilt which attaches itself to such a love as our's: but I can no more struggle against it than I could breast the furious tide of the mightiest river as it rolls into the sea. Can you understand me when I tell you that if the Enemy of Mankind proffered me happiness in your arms as the price of my soul, I would sign the compact——Oh, sign it cheerfully—joyously!"

"Good heavens, Adolphus, speak not in this dreadful manner!" murmured the Countess, with a shudder sweeping over her frame, and yet with an irrepressible tenderness in the soft melting eyes and on the passion-breathing lips.

"Dreadful?" ejaculated Adolphus: "is there anything dreadful in learning that you are the object of a love so devoted as mine? Oh, this love is all the world to me! Crown it with happiness—and the world becomes an elysium! Doom

me to despair—and the world is a blank——no, a veritable hell," he added with frightful emphasis, "from which I will fly as a wretched suicide!"

"Oh, my God, my God! what words are these!" murmured Ethel: and involuntarily, so to speak—or rather under the influence of an irresistible impulse—she threw herself in his arms, weeping and sobbing upon his breast.

"Dearest, dearest Ethel," he murmured, in the harmonious tone of love which sank down into the very depths of her soul; "you know not—Oh, you know not how very dear you are to me!"—and he imprinted a thousand impassioned kisses upon her lips, her burning cheeks, and her throbbing brows.

"Good heavens, if *he* should enter suddenly!" ejaculated the Countess, disengaging herself from Lord Osmond's enraptured embrace. "No, no—we must separate—you must depart! Not for an instant must you dream of coming to take up your abode beneath this roof again! We should stand the risk of betraying ourselves a thousand times in the day. It would be fatal to my reputation——I cannot say to my happiness; for *that* is gone since I learnt to love you!"

"Oh, no!—in love there is happiness!" exclaimed Adolphus, in a fervid tone. "Love banishes all considerations: it holds everything cheap and light in comparison with the power and the immensity of its own sentiment. But listen to me, dearest Ethel, while I speak seriously and without excitement. Eighteen months have elapsed since you became the Countess of Lascelles. When you returned from the country after the honeymoon, you found me at this house. We had never seen each other before. I was in France when the marriage took place: I knew not even that it was contemplated until I received my father's letter to say that the ceremony was solemnized. He invited me not to it; and yet there was no coldness between us *then*."

"Wherefore recapitulate all these things," asked the Countess, "which are so well known to me?"

"Because they will lead me on in a consecutive manner to what I have to explain as my purpose," responded the young nobleman. "Bear with me, Ethel: grant me your attention—I beseech you. We met, then, as I have said, for the first time when you returned from the country where the honeymoon was spent; and in this very apartment was it we looked each other in the face for that first time. I had heard that you were beautiful: but, good heavens! I had expected not to find myself in the presence of an angel. As if a lightning flash had darted in unto my soul—as if an inspiration had penetrated my brain—did the conviction strike me that it was I who should have led you to the altar, and that we were made to suit each other, though heaven had ordained that you should become another's. I loved you at first sight: I could have fallen down and worshipped you as you stood there! No wonder, then, that for the few weeks which followed, my manner was abstracted—that I looked dull and unhappy—that I spoke petulantly to my father when he addressed me. And he, putting the worst construction on everything, thought me selfish and undutiful—fancying that my mind was occupied with ideas of filthy lucre, while it was absorbed in a devouring, maddening, frenzied passion. He taunted me with a sordid dislike to his marriage, on the ground that I feared lest some portion of his estates should pass away from me. No wonder that I was stricken dumb by the accusation—or that when I recovered the power of speech, my incoherent words, coupled with my still vacant and dismayed looks, should have seemed to justify his suspicions. But what could I tell him? Not the truth! I could not confess that I adored and worshipped his charming and beautiful wife!—you know that I could not! He ordered me from the house—this house in which he had not beheld my presence with pleasure from the first moment of his return with his bride. Since then, for more than a year, we have been estranged; and I have known not how to act. But have you forgotten the day, sweetest Ethel, when I met you by accident seven or eight months ago, and when under the influence of my impassioned love, I avowed all I felt?—have you forgotten how by your looks rather than by your words, you suffered me to understand that you had not seen me with indifference? And then too, on those few occasions that we have since met—in those hurried and stolen interviews which I have managed to obtain—you have confessed the love which you feel for me——"

"Again, I ask you, Adolphus," inquired Ethel, glancing anxiously towards the door, "why all these recapitulations?"

"Listen, my beloved one—and you shall learn what I mean. I have already told you," continued Lord Osmond, "that I cannot possibly exist in this manner. I must see you often—constantly. If it be only to gaze upon your countenance—to hear the sound of your voice—and to press your hand occasionally—these pleasures must I have. You will not deny them? This, then, is the plan I have formed:—I will humble myself to my father; I will acknowledge a selfishness and a worldly-mindedness of which I never was guilty; I will beseech his forgiveness. He cannot refuse it. With all his numerous faults, he is not a man possessing a heart that can be termed unredeemably bad. You will tell him presently that finding he was not at home, I ventured to seek an interview with you—that I besought you to deliver to his ears the assurance of my contrition——"

"O Adolphus, it is impossible!—we cannot live beneath the same roof!" interrupted the Countess, with the vehemence of one who felt that all her good resolutions were rapidly melting away, and who sought to regain them.

"Surely, surely, we can be upon our guard!" said Lord Osmond, with a look and tone of the most earnest entreaty: "surely, surely, we can so control our looks—so measure our words—so bear ourselves to each other, as to defy suspicion? In my father's presence, I will be all respectful attention towards you——"

"O Adolphus," murmured the Countess, "this love of our's will be fatal to me—it will be my destruction——I feel that it will! There is already a terrible presentiment of evil in my soul——"

"Banish it, Ethel—banish it, I beseech you!"—and the young nobleman grew more earnest and imploring in his pleadings. "Abandon not yourself to such groundless fears—such baseless mis-

givings. I tell you that we will be all circumspection in our conduct. But conceive the happiness, dearest Ethel, of living beneath the same roof—of breathing the same atmosphere——"

"No, Adolphus—it is impossible!" exclaimed the Countess, all her better feelings and all her fortitude suddenly reviving with greater power too than on any other occasion during this interview. "I have been standing on the brink of a precipice; and I will retreat in time. If you really love me—if you entertain the slightest spark of affection for me—impel me not over that brink—hurl me not down into the abyss beneath! No, no—it shall not be! Besides, Adolphus, it would be something shocking and revolting to think that you, the son, should live beneath the same roof with my husband, the father, and know that I am compelled to receive from him those caresses which you may not in honour bestow. My mind is made up! It will cost me many, many bitter pangs to renounce this love of your's: but it shall be done. And if I who am a woman, can prove thus resolute—you, as a man, must show yourself even stronger still in the performance of a duty. Leave me, Adolphus—I entreat—I conjure——nay, I command that you leave me!"

"Ethel—dearest Ethel—you are driving me to despair!"—and the young nobleman was frightfully distressed.

"And I too am in despair," rejoined the Countess: "but my resolve is taken. It would be cruel—worse than cruel—ungenerous and unmanly for you, Adolphus, to attempt to turn me from my purpose. Leave me, I say."

"And my father?" inquired Lord Osmond, in a deep voice full of concentrated emotion, while his looks did indeed bespeak the despair which his lips had proclaimed: "what will you say to him? how will you account for my presence here to-day?"

"I will tell him all that you have suggested," was Ethel's quick and firm response: "but frankly do I inform you, Adolphus, that I shall speak in such a manner as to show that while I earnestly wish him to become friendly with you again, it is not my desire that you should return to dwell in this house."

With these words, the Countess of Lascelles rose abruptly from the sofa; and not daring to trust herself another moment with Adolphus, she rushed from the room. A few minutes afterwards the young nobleman issued from the house, with a forced serenity of aspect, but with blank despair in his heart.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE EVENING PARTY.

It was now the memorable Saturday evening on which Mrs. Macaulay was to give her party in honour of the reconciliation between herself and Mrs. Sifkin who lived over the way. The number of guests had been duly borne in mind with regard to the preparations for the entertainment: but at about six o'clock Mrs. Macaulay gave another look at the eatables and drinkables, for the purpose of satisfying herself that there would be sufficient on the one hand, as well as that there should be no undue extravagance on the other. Opening a cupboard in her own front-parlour, she contemplated a little array of five decanters—two containing port, purchased at the rate of one-and-threepence a bottle at the oilman's who dealt in British wines—the next two containing sherry, procured at the same place and at the same price—and the fifth decanter being two-thirds full of brandy, which Mrs. Macaulay had not purchased at all, but which were the remains of a bottle that Mr. Redcliffe had no farther use for.

"Let me see," said Mrs. Macaulay; "how many will there be of us altogether?"—and she proceeded to tell off the expected guests on her fingers for about the twentieth time during this particular day. "There is the two Wanklins—Miss Spilsbury—and Captain Bluff: that's four. Then there's me and Master Ashton: for I know from what he said his sister won't come: so that makes six. Then there's Mrs. Dumpling—Mrs. Sifkin—Mr. Chubb (the sanctimonious humbug!)—and Mr. Hogben: that makes ten. Then there's Mrs. Chowley and her two daughters—the conceited chits!—and that makes thirteen. Thirteen people—and four bottles of wine. Each bottle ten glasses: that's forty glasses, to be divided by thirteen. Well, it will give three a-piece, and just leave a drain at the bottom of each decanter for gentility's sake. Because *then* comes the brandy, the hot water, and sugar——and I am not quite clear but that there's rather too much wine."

Mrs. Macaulay stood gazing dubiously for a few minutes on the little array of decanters,—pondering whether she should suppress the production of one of port or one of sherry; and there was even a moment when she actually thought of keeping back one of each. But then she remembered that she had promised to do the thing handsomely and come out with a genteel little spread: so she decided upon keeping back nothing at all, and going the whole hog with her extravagance and profusion for once in a way. Having arrived at this decision, she hastened down stairs to inspect the larder; and having cast a look over its contents, she soliloquized after the following fashion:—

"Cold veal pie at the head of the table—large enough to bear at least thirteen helps. Then there's four dozen of oysters ordered for nine o'clock——But dear me! what if the best part of the company should take a fancy to oysters? *I* sha'n't touch any for one: but there are twelve who *might;* and how many would that give to each? Four dozen is forty-eight; and twelves into forty-eight go four. That would be only four oysters a-piece!"

At this awful calculation the worthy lady looked somewhat blank; and she was even deliberating whether she should not send forth to order an extra two dozen of oysters, when she again plunged her looks into the larder, and went on soliloquizing.

"Fried sausages and mashed potatoes for the bottom of the table—and the oysters to go in the middle. The spread, after all, would be genteel and liberal enough. Susan!" she exclaimed, turning round to one of the maids, "did Mr. Redcliffe give orders for his dinner to-morrow, as he always does on Saturday night for the Sunday?"

"Yes, ma'am," was the response. "He said, as usual, that we were to get him what we liked, so as he wasn't troubled about it—only that he didn't want any more poultry for the present."

"Then that's capital!" cried Mrs. Macaulay, her countenance becoming radiant. "There's this fowl that he's only eaten a wing of for to-day's dinner, and which he won't think of having up again. I am sure I should be the last person in the world to make use of it if I wasn't certain that he would not want it. And as for leaving it here to get as dry as a stick by Monday morning, and then be told that he didn't wish to see it brought up to table again——it would be quite a sin! So I tell you what, Susan—cut it up—make the one wing look as much like two as possible, by dividing the pinion—and broil it all with mushroom sauce. There are some pickled mushrooms in a bottle somewhere. Yes—after all it will be a beautiful little supper; and I know Mrs. Dumpling will be ready to bite her own head off with envy and jealousy when she thinks of her own trumpery suppers of stale tarts and currant-wine."

Having arrived at all these very comfortable and satisfactary conclusions, Mrs. Macaulay gave out the tea, coffee, and sugar, as well as the silver tea-spoons, which she carefully counted; and with many injunctions against breaking any of the best china tea-service, she sailed forth from the kitchen. Ascending to her chamber, which was behind the parlour, she performed her toilet; and at five minutes before seven she lighted the mould-candles in the sitting-room just named. Then—in all the glory of a new black silk-gown, a cap with pink ribbons, her gold watch and chain, and a large fan which she had won in a sixpenny raffle twenty-five years previously—she took her seat to await the presence of the company. At five minutes past seven there was a double knock at the door; and the servant ushered in Mr. and Mrs. Wanklin—the former a short, sedate, sentimental-looking, pale-faced man in spectacles—the latter a tall, stately, consequential dame—and both of "a certain age." They dwelt in the neighbourhood—Mr. Wanklin keeping a circulating library on one side of a little shop, and Mrs. Wanklin a Berlin wool emporium by means of the window, shelves, and counter of the opposite side. This arrival was speedily followed by that of Miss Spilsbury—a tall, gaunt, maiden lady of fifty, with a hatchet face and a demure look—a brown false front, and a slate-coloured silk dress, very scanty in the skirt. She had an independence of seventy-five pounds a year, and was therefore much thought of by her friends and acquaintances. She was followed by Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk—a stout, bald-headed, pragmatic individual—sententious in his speech, and sepulchral in his tone. Then came Mrs. Chowley and the two Miss Chowleys—the mamma being a young widow of fifty-six or so, and "the girls" (as she called them) being respectively thirty-two and thirty. This delightful family kept a baby-linen warehouse in the Tottenham Court Road; and as Mrs. Chowley's brother was butler in a Duke's family, and her great-grandfather had been coachman to some other Duke in the time of George II, the said delightful family was considered exceedingly aristocratic in all its connexions and associations.

Scarcely were the Chowleys seated, when there was a terrific knock and violent ring at the front door; and Captain Bluff was in a few moments announced. This was a guest of whom Mrs. Macaulay had reason to be proud, on account of the prefix of "Captain"—although the gallant officer himself did not wear any particular uniform, for the simple reason that none *is* worn by the commanders of the Gravesend steam-packets, to which service Captain Bluff was honourably attached. The Captain—who was a red-faced, weather-beaten man, dressed all in blue, with a blue-checked shirt—was warmly greeted by his hostess, and duly presented to the other guests, to whom he was previously unknown. At first the Miss Chowleys—who were very ugly and very affected, and embued with the most exquisite appreciation of everything which was aristocratic and genteel—thought it necessary to be amazingly disgusted, inasmuch as the Captain brought with him an unmistakable odour of rum and strong Cubas: but their looks and their manner changed all in a moment, when Mrs. Macaulay hastily whispered to them aside, that her very particular friend Captain Bluff had a few pounds in the Funds and was a single man; so that the young ladies most amiably made room for this jolly young bachelor of eight-and-forty to sit between them on one side of the fire-place.

The Captain's arrival was promptly followed by that of Mrs. Dumpling, who was a stout, red-faced, important dame—very fond of mixing herself up in her neighbours' concerns—very much given to gossiping and scandal—and equally so to strong waters, under whatsoever denominations—whether gin, rum, brandy, or shrub. On entering the apartment, she cast her looks around; and then fixing her gaze significantly upon Mrs. Macaulay, said, "So *she* has not come yet?"

"Why, I dare say," was the answer of the worthy hostess, "that Mrs. Sifkin wants you all to be assembled first, and gives you time for the purpose; so that her own appearance may have a becoming effect. And it's very right and proper on her part too: because, you know," added Mrs. Macaulay, looking around, "that Mrs. Sifkin is in duty bound to offer me her hand *first* when she enters the room."

Hereupon a discussion arose,—Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, gravely and sententiously expressing his opinion that as Mrs. Macaulay was the hostess, and as she had already received an apology from Mrs. Sifkin, conveyed through Mrs. Dumpling, it was only consistent with good breeding that Mrs. Macaulay should be foremost in welcoming her late enemy. Mr. Wanklin was of the same sentiment, which he confirmed by a quotation from a novel in his own circulating library: Mrs. Chowley followed on the same side, observing that from her connexions she had peculiar opportunities of laying down the law of etiquette on such a delicate point. This remark enabled the elder Miss Chowley—who had already set her cap at the Captain—to seize the occasion of whispering in his ear that her uncle was butler in a Duke's household, and that her great-great-grandfather had been coachman to some other Duke: whereat Captain Bluff expressed his admiration by a knowing wink, and looked towards the cupboard as if he were longing to make him-

self acquainted with its contents. However, it was finally settled that Mrs. Macaulay should present her hand to Mrs. Sifkin whensoever that lady might make her appearance; and though Mrs. Macaulay outwardly yielded with an excellent grace, she inwardly vowed eternal animosity thenceforth to all present who had conspired to force her into such a degradation.

"I don't think we are all here yet?" said Mrs. Dumpling, in a bland whisper to Mrs. Macaulay; "for I recollect you told me——"

"No, we are not all here yet," interrupted the lady thus appealed to, as she drew herself up in a dignified manner. "There's Mr. Hogben to come—the gentleman, you know, who was for twenty years in the service of the late King and that of her present Majesty, but who suddenly had a fortune left him."

Here it may be as well to inform the reader that Mr. Hogben, whose official services under the Crown were so magnificently paraded, had for twenty years filled the honourable though onerous, bustling, and not very lucrative situation of two-penny postman—but by a sudden windfall inheriting a few thousand pounds, he had set up as a gentleman and was now living on his means.

Scarcely had Mrs. Macaulay ceased speaking, when an unmistakable postman's knock caused the whole company to start, with the exception of Captain Bluff—who was never known to start at anything—not even when his steamer upset a wherry and drowned three people while working its way through the crowded mazes of the Pool.

"That's Mr. Hogben!" cried Mrs. Macaulay. "Dear me! that a gentleman in his situation should give such a knock! But it's all the force of habit—and quite natural enough, Lord bless us!"

"Amen!" said Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, in his deep sepulchral voice; and the utterance of the word was another illustration of that force of habit which Mrs. Macaulay had just been commenting upon.

Mr. Hogben made his appearance—and a very remarkable one it was too. He was a thin, wiry individual—dressed out in a style which even the Miss Chowleys whisperingly declared to be the very pink of fashion; and he glided into the room with a quick, shambling gait, just as postmen are seen to adopt as they shuffle rapidly along the streets, pursuing their professional avocations from one house door to another.

"And still we are not complete," said Mrs. Dumpling to Mrs. Macaulay, when Mr. Hogben, having taken a seat next to Mrs. Chowley, began to pay very marked attention to this dashing young widow of fifty-six.

"No—not yet," responded the hostess to Mrs. Dumpling's remark: then raising her voice for the behoof of all the company, she added, "I am certain of having the pleasure of introducing to you a young gentleman—ahem!—secretary to his Grace the Duke of Marchmont—and of course the Duke's very particular and intimate friend. Only conceive the pleasure and happiness of living constantly with a Duke!"

"As my uncle does now," said the elder Miss Chowley, thus alluding to the relative who served as a ducal butler.

"And as our ancestor did before him," added the younger Miss Chowley—thus, with a proud family satisfaction, referring to her great-great-grandfather who was a ducal coachman.

"Well, I never seed a Dook to my knowledge in all my life," said Captain Bluff, who spoke in a very hoarse voice,—"except it was at the figger-head of a ship—and that was a wooden Dook—— old Vellington."

The conversation was interrupted by the maid's announcement of "Mr. Ashton;" and Christian made his appearance.

"And where, my very dear young friend," cried Mrs. Macaulay, when the usual compliments were exchanged, "is that charming sister of your's. What! she couldn't come? Oh, dear me! I am so disappointed! But I suppose—ahem!—Lady Octavian Meredith couldn't spare her? Mr. Ashton's sister," added the worthy woman, looking round upon her guests, "is the bosom-friend—ahem!—of Lady Octavian Meredith; and I am sure you are all as much disappointed as I am that she cannot come."

Of course there was a universal expression of feeling in accordance with Mrs. Macaulay's remark; and Christian, as a Duke's secretary, and having a sister who was bosom friend to a titled lady, at once became the lion of the party.

Another knock and ring now produced a greater sensation than any previous summons at the front-door: for every one present felt assured that *this* must be Mrs. Sifkin. And Mrs. Sifkin it was who made her appearance in the shape of a little vinegar-looking, sharp-eyed, angular-featured woman, with carrotty hair. She was very plainly dressed, and seemed every inch of her the griping, greedy, cheese-paring lodging-house-keeper. Her thin lips were tightly compressed; and she had evidently made up her mind to treat Mrs. Macaulay with just as much civility or reserve, as the case might be, which she should experience at that lady's hands. There was a solemn silence as the two rivals stood in the presence of each other: but when Mrs. Macaulay extended her hand and bade Mrs. Sifkin consider herself to be quite at home, the guests signified their applause by what would be termed "a sensation" on the part of a public meeting. Then the vinegar aspect of Mrs. Sifkin relaxed; and she smiled in as honied a manner as such a countenance could possibly smile. Nothing *then* could exceed the love and friendship, the esteem and affection, which all in a moment sprang up between the late rivals and enemies. Mrs. Macaulay thought it becoming to get up a little cry,—sobbingly vowing that she had always regarded Mrs. Sifkin with a sisterly love although they were at daggers drawn: to which Mrs. Sifkin replied that as a true Christian she had never failed to remember Mrs. Macaulay in her prayers. This assertion elicited a deep sepulchral "Amen!" from the parish clerk—a quotation from a Minerva-press novel on the part of Mr. Wanklin, the circulating-library-keeper—and a subdued expression which sounded very much like "Humbug!" from the throat of Captain Bluff.

Things however were now upon a most amiable footing. Mrs. Macaulay rang for tea and coffee, and sat herself down at the table to preside over the festive scene. Plates of thin bread-and-butter, toast, and seed-cake (this being cut up in *thirteen* very small slices) were placed upon the board:

the cups "which cheered without inebriating" were passed round, to the satisfaction of all present save that of Captain Bluff, who, though he tossed off a cup of coffee at one draught, had all his thoughts settled upon rum. When the tea-things were cleared away, there was a round game,—from which however Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, requested to be omitted, on the ground that it was inconsistent with the solemnity and piety of his clerical calling; and, he remembered also that he had a few baptismal certificates to fill up at home. So, having been careful to ascertain at what hour supper would be on table, he begged to be excused in the meanwhile.

The round game progressed very well without him, and was only once disturbed by an insinuation on the part of Mrs. Sifkin that Mrs. Dumpling had purloined some of her fish: but the former lady suffered herself to be appeased by the circumstance of Captain Bluff considerately given her a handful of his own—an act of kindness which was performed just in time to save Mrs. Dumpling from the disagreeable ordeal of having her eyes scratched out by her vixenish accuser. Christian might have made a similar accusation, and with considerable truth too, if he had chosen, against Miss Spilsbury: for if this highly respectable maiden lady, who lived upon an independence and was considered "quite genteel," kept very quiet in respect to her tongue, she was very busy with her fingers; and every time she thought Christian was not looking, she pilfered his fish,—endeavouring to conceal the theft under a short cough and a fumbling for her pocket-handkerchief. Christian however suffered himself to be robbed with a most exemplary patience—a circumstance which raised him so high in Miss Spilsbury's estimation, that when the round game was over, she whispered to Mrs. Macaulay, loud enough for him to overhear, that he was the nicest young man she had ever met in all her life.

The round game being finished, the maid entered to lay the cloth for supper; and Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, now re-appeared,—smelling very strong of tobacco-smoke, looking very red in the face, and having a certain watery vacant stare about the eyes. This however would not have occasioned any wonder on the part of the company, if they had known that instead of retiring into the bosom of his own family to write out basptismal certificates, he had been all the time in the hot parlour of the public-house round the corner, smoking his pipe and moistening his lips with three successive pints of strong old Kennet ale—a proceeding which the ecclesiastical gentleman doubtless regarded as far more innocent and likewise as more orthodox than joining in a round game of "commerce."

While the servant was laying the cloth, Mrs. Macaulay affected to be conversing in a perfectly calm and untroubled manner, though in reality she was watching askance every movement and arrangement of her domestic, for fear lest she should do something wrong; and she could not help interspersing her conversation with frequent hints and orders to the girl.

"Well, as I was saying," Mrs. Macaulay observed, "it would be impossible to have a nicer or better lodger than Mr. Redcliffe. He never troubles himself about——the pepper-box on that side, Jane——what he is going to have for dinner, as long as his meals are served up regular. He is very quiet——the mustard in this corner, Jane ——talks very little to anybody——look! the cloth is all tumbled——but is out a great deal. I am sure for the life of me I don't know what he can always be doing with himself——do take care, Jane!——and the other night he stayed out so very late I was quite frightened ——the pie at *this* end, Jane!"

"Genelmen will stay out late sometimes," observed Captain Bluff; and he winked knowingly at the first male countenance which met his eye at the moment, and which happened to be that of Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, who instantaneously put on an air of indignation, which, inasmuch as it was a tipsy one, only had the effect of making Captain Bluff burst out into a shout of uproarious laughter.

"Did you mean that look and that laugh for me, sir?" inquired Mr. Chubb, in the deepest of his sepulchral tones, and endeavouring to appear very awfully solemn indeed.

"Well, I did—and that's the truth on't!" returned Captain Bluff: "so you can put it in your pipe and smoke it; and if so be it's a sort of bakker you ain't used to, you must make the best of the bargin."

Here Mr. Chubb rose from his seat, and was either about to appeal to the company or else to make a personal assault upon Captain Bluff,—when the elder Miss Chowley threw herself between them, and availed herself of the opportunity to get up a most interesting little tragedy of affright, entreaty, and hysterical symptoms,—not forgetting to implore the Captain to master his temper and spare *her* feelings.

"Oh! let him get the steam up," vociferated Bluff: "he's precious cranky and will soon bust his biler."

Mr. Chubb looked round with awe-inspiring dismay. The idea that a parish clerk should be thus insulted—thus outraged! What would the world come to next? This dreadful question did Mr. Chubb's countenance appear to ask, in default of the power of his tongue to say anything at all.

"Come, old feller," said Bluff, who was really a very good-natured man, "I didn't mean to offend you. If that there twenty-horse power steam-ingin which is working in your buzzum goes too fast, ease her and stop her; but don't go for to keep down the safety-walve with the sartainty of busting outright in a minute or two. Here, tip us your paddle, and let's sit down to mess as good friends."

"Amen!" groaned Mr. Chubb, as he extended the hand which, figuratively described as a paddle, the gallant Captain had so bluntly solicited.

Supper was now served up. The veal-pie stood at the head of the table—the dish of oysters in the middle—the sausages and mashed potatoes at the bottom. The broiled fowl, with the mushroom sauce, looked very handsome as a side-dish—and in order to correspond therewith, the thoughtful servant had placed on the opposite side an apple-tart, which had been made for Mr. Redcliffe's dinner on the morrow, but which the said thoughtful Jane had taken it into her head might just as

well figure on her mistress's supper table for this particular occasion. She then glanced half smilingly and half apprehensively at Mrs. Macaulay, to assure herself that this little prudential arrangement met the worthy lady's approbation; and the quick but scarcely perceptible nod which her mistress gave, placed her perfectly at her ease.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, pray be seated," said Mrs. Macaulay. "You see I treat you without ceremony: it is merely a humble repast—but such as it is, you are quite welcome:"—and as she thus spoke, she glanced askance at Mrs. Dumpling to see how that lady regarded the display.

But so far from Mrs. Dumpling being ready through envy or jealousy to bite her own head off—as Mrs. Macaulay had ere now anticipated—the sort of readiness she did exhibit, was a strong yearning to commence an attack on the sausages and mashed potatoes. The company seated themselves; and to Mrs. Macaulay's infinite relief, the oysters, so far from being in general request, were only rendered available for the appetites of a few—so that she had no fear of an insufficiency of that particular portion of the repast.

"What for you, Mr. Chubb?" inquired Mrs. Macaulay, when she had seen that the ladies were becomingly cared for. "Shall it be pie? I can recommend it."

"Amen," responded the parish clerk, who had just emptied his tumbler of ale and had beckoned the girl to refill it.

"And you, Captain Bluff?" said Mrs. Macaulay, with her most amiable smile.

"Sassengers and meshed taturs for me, ma'am," was the Captain's response. "Always begin with the hot things and wind up with cold uns. Leave the coldest till last—cos why they lays easier on t'other foundation. So I'll have sassengers fust: then I'll pitch into the briled fowl: arterwards I'll taste the meat-pie; and I'll wind up with a dozen or so of them hoysters—with maybe a bit of the thingumbob on t'other side of the table:" thus alluding to the fruit-tart.

There was now a pause, of which Mrs. Macaulay took advantage to say in an impressive manner, "Jane, you have forgotten to put the port and sherry on the table."

Here the worthy hostess again looked furtively at Mrs. Dumpling: but this excellent lady was so busy with the food upon her plate, that she had really no time nor thought for that envy and jealousy which Mrs. Macaulay had been anxious to provoke; and therefore the absence of those feelings on Mrs. Dumpling's part rather chagrined and annoyed Mrs. Macaulay than otherwise.

The wine was produced: and Mrs. Macaulay begged the ladies and gentlemen to take care of themselves.

"I don't know whether you like port that is fruity, Mr. Chubb," she said; "but my wine-merchant assured me that this was of the very best quality; and I don't mind whispering in your ear that it is the same which he supplies to the Duke of Wellington's table."

This whispered assurance was however loud enough to be caught by the ear of every one present; and Mrs. Dumpling, who was at the moment handing her plate for a third supply of sausages and mashed potatoes, had leisure to bridle up and exchange a malicious look with Mrs. Sifkin—as much as to imply that this was a mere romance of their dearly beloved and excellent hostess about her wine. Mrs. Macaulay, who saw what was passing, nevertheless affected to be perfectly innocent on the subject; though she inwardly vowed to cut Mrs. Dumpling from the very moment after their shaking hands when the hour for departure should come—and she was equally resolute to pick another quarrel with Mrs. Sifkin on the following day.

"Try the sherry, Mr. Ashton," she said, still maintaining all the winning urbanity proper to the hospitable founder of a feast. "By the bye ——how very extraordinary! this is some of the identical wine which is supplied to your friend the Duke of Marchmont. You surely *must* recognise it? You *must* have tasted the very same quality at his Grace's table?"

Now, in making this earnest appeal to our youthful hero, Mrs. Macaulay had two distinct objects to gain. One was to elicit such an answer as would confirm the impression she wished to convey about the excellence of her wine; and the other was to stand on a pedestal in the estimation of her guests at thus being on such intimate terms with the friend and companion of a Duke. But Christian was both too honest and too inexperienced in the ways of the world, to be coaxed and wheedled into a falsehood for the behoof of Mrs. Macaulay's pride and vanity: so he answered with great ingenuousness and *naiveté*, "Really I am no judge of wine—though this seems sweeter than any sherry I have ever tasted before; and as for the Duke's table, of course I don't dine at it—I take my meals with the steward."

Mrs. Dumpling and Mrs. Sifkin exchanged rapid but malicious glances; and the Miss Chowleys tossed their heads, as much as to infer that Christian was nothing so very great after all, and that they were not quite sure he was anything better than their uncle who was a Duke's butler, or their ancestor who had been a Duke's coachman. Mrs. Macaulay, for the moment thrown into confusion by young Ashton's unsophisticated response, appeared to be suddenly seized with an inclination to dive deep into the mysteries of the pie before her; and fortunately Captain Bluff came out with something comical in the course of a minute, so that the conversation was turned and Mrs. Macaulay recovered her good spirits.

The comestibles were disposed of—and literally so, for every dish was emptied, Mrs. Dumpling eating enough for any six moderate feeders, and Captain Bluff partaking of everything, finishing the oysters, and winding up with a plate of apple-tart. The brandy was now placed upon the board; the conversation grew more animated: Captain Bluff became more and more uproarious, and flung amatory glances upon the elder Miss Chowley. The consequence was that this young lady, who for the last sixteen years—indeed ever since she *was* sixteen—had been looking out for a husband, felt assured she was in a fair way to obtain one at last; and when the Captain, under the influence of the bad wine, frequent tumblers of ale, and his second glass of brandy-and-water, trod accidentally with his heavy boot upon her toe—at the same time (but *this* was purposely done) whispering some joke about the baby-linen warehouse—Miss Chowley felt that her conquest was

complete. She whispered a few words to her mamma, who in order to listen to her eldest "girl," was compelled for the moment to leave off listening to the tender whispers of Mr. Hogben, the enriched twopenny postman; and the result of the whispering between the mamma and the daughter was that the latter conveyed to the Captain an invitation (also in a whisper) to tea on the following evening.

"Blow me tight!" vociferated Bluff, "if I wouldn't come and tackle your mess-table with the greatest pleasure: but to-morrow there's a excursion down to Margate with my boat—and I must be on the paddle-box from nine in the morning till nine at night."

Miss Chowley blushed red as a peony at the stentorian manner in which her whispered invitation to tea was thus proclaimed to the whole company; and Miss Spilsbury—the tall, gaunt maiden lady—drew up her form with a prudishness which made it look still taller and more gaunt than it was before.

But this little incident was quickly succeeded by another which attracted general notice. Mrs. Dumpling, who had a keen eye to the spirits, saw that the brandy was so rapidly disappearing she must make haste and finish her first tumbler in order to have a chance of obtaining a second; and in doing this, some of the hot steaming fluid went what is called "the wrong way." So poor Mrs. Dumpling became almost convulsed with a violent fit of coughing, and looked as if she were going off in an apoplectic fit.

"Tap her on the back!" cried Mrs. Sifkin.

"Cut her stay-lace!" exclaimed Mrs. Wanklin.

"Throw water into her face!" said Mrs. Macaulay, with an air of deepest concern, and inwardly hoping that some one would at once follow out the suggestion by dashing a tumber full of the cold fluid in the choking lady's countenance.

"Ease her!" cried Captain Bluff, in a voice as loud and hoarse as if he were roaring from the top of the paddle-box to the boy stationed at the hatchway of the engine-room. "Stop her! Don't let her go-ahead like that 'ere! By jingo, she's gone down starn foremost!" he vociferatingly added, as the unfortunate Mrs. Dumpling tumbled off her chair.

Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, instantaneously endeavoured to raise the worthy dame: but he tumbled down likewise—for truth compels us to declare that this very orthodox gentleman was now excessively drunk.

"That's all the effect of your good wine, ma'am," roared Captain Bluff, with a shout of laughter. "Their bilers is busted—their ingius is all stopped—they're reglarly brandy-logged——I knowed how it would be! They must ile their wheels well for theirselves afore they'll go agin."

At first Mrs. Macaulay was inclined to be very indignant and to seem very much disgusted at this exhibition on the part of Mrs. Dumpling and the parish clerk: but the compliment conveyed by Captain Bluff in respect to her wine, not merely appeased her in a moment, but made her look upon the scene with a complaisant and satisfied air. Mrs. Dumpling was speedily raised up in the brawny arms of Captain Bluff; while Christian performed the same kind office for Mr. Chubb.

"I'm afeard you're werry drunk, sir," said the Captain, now finding leisure to address this observation with John Bull bluntness and seamanlike frankness to the discomfited parish clerk,—"werry drunk indeed, sir! and I likes for to see it. Shows you've been enjoying yourself!"

"Amen!" gutturally hiccoughed Mr. Chubb.

"Do, my dear young friend," said Mrs. Macaulay to Christian, "see the poor man home. He lives in Duke Street—next door, you know, to the baker's where you used to deal when you lived here."

"I will see him home with much pleasure," replied young Ashton. "But do you think he can stand?"

"Stand?" echoed Chubb: and the next moment he began rapping out such a series of profane oaths that the Miss Chowleys shrieked in dismay—and Mrs. Chowley was so much overcome that she fell into the arms of Mr. Hogben, who kindly offered to deliver her at her own door, though perhaps it would prove the weightiest letter he had ever in all his experience had so to deliver. As for Miss Spilsbury, she pursed up her mouth with supreme disgust; while Mrs. Sifkin whispered to Mrs. Wanklin that if people would cheat their guests with wine at one-and-threepence, making them believe it cost five shillings a bottle, it was no wonder such consequences should ensue.

In the midst of the confusion Christian managed to get the parish clerk out of the room, and anon out of the house: but scarcely had he been thus conducted into the fresh air, when Mr. Chubb seemed doggedly determined to sit down upon the front-door steps; and with sundry imprecations invoked against his own eyes and limbs, he persisted in pulling off his coat and high-lows, with the idea that he was in his own chamber and about to get into bed. Christian experienced the greatest trouble in lifting him up again; and as he led the parish clerk along, this inebriate gentleman shouted forth a strange medley, consisting of portions of the hundredth psalm and of a bacchanalian song; so that it was fortunate indeed they encountered no policemen, or Mr. Chubb might have passed the remainder of the night in the station-house.

Ultimately our young hero succeeded in getting the parish clerk to his own door,—which they thus reached as some adjacent church-clock was proclaiming the hour of midnight. It was a private house: for Mr. Chubb was a schoolmaster—and his school-room was at the back part of the premises, with an entrance from another street. A light was burning in the front-parlour; and the moment Christian knocked at the door, that light disappeared, so that he knew his summons was to be at once attended to. He heard a chain let fall within; and the door was opened. But Christian was seized with amazement at the first glance which he threw upon the being who thus opened that door. She was a young creature of not more than sixteen, and of the most ravishing beauty. That same glance showed him too that there was an air of superiority about her—a natural gentility which forbade the thought that she could be the daughter of the parish clerk. Yet she was plainly though neatly dressed; and thus so far as her apparel went, she might have belonged to the Chubb family. But Christian felt convinced she did *not*. There was as much difference between the clumsy vulgarity of Mr. Chubb and the exquisite gentility

of this charming creature, as there is between the uncouth cart-horse and the thorough-bred.

The parish clerk was leaning against the railings in front of the house, his hat cocked over his left ear—his white cravat loosened and in disorder—and his lips giving forth incoherent mutterings, in which the words "vestry"—"hundredth psalm"—"praise and glory," blended with an oath or two, were alone intelligible.

"I am sorry," said Christian, lifting his hat to the young creature whose beauty so ravished him, "that you should be compelled to gaze on such a spectacle as this."

The young girl advanced upon the threshold—held forward the light which she carried in her hand—and now saw more plainly than she did at first, in what condition Mr. Chubb had been brought home. Her countenance, hitherto remarkable for its softness, and characterized by the sweetest amiability of look, rapidly assumed an expression of mingled astonishment, indignation, and disgust: but suddenly bethinking herself that some answer was due to Christian's courteous remark, she said with a well-bred affability, blended with the sweetest virginal modesty, "And I on my part, sir, am sorry that you should have had so unpleasant a task to perform."

"What's the matter?" cried a shrill vixenish female voice from the top of the staircase: "what's the matter, I say, Miss Vincent?"

"Ah," thought Christian to himself, "she is not, then, the daughter of these people!"—and he felt an indescribable and at the moment unaccountable satisfaction at receiving this confirmation of his previous idea upon the subject.

"It is Mr. Chubb," answered the young lady—for such indeed did she appear to be: and she spoke with an amiable sweetness, mingled however with a visible timidity and trepidation.

"Then why doesn't Mr. Chubb come in?" demanded the same shrill voice which had already spoken from the head of the staircase. "And who are you a-talking to there, Miss Vincent?"

"A young gentleman has been kind enough," she answered, "to see Mr. Chubb home."

"Oh, I understand all about it!" cried the shrill voice: "he's drunk—the beast!"

At this coarse, though really not altogether uncalled for remark, the countenance of the beautiful Miss Vincent flushed again, as if the natural delicacy of her soul were shocked at the woman's grossness; and the quick furtive look which she threw at Christian, showed him how pained she felt at being thus seen in any sort of connexion with such low-bred persons. The youth, however, glanced towards her with a mingled admiration and sympathy, which proved that he felt for her—and that so far from thinking the worse of her for being in that house, he commiserated her on account of the circumstances, whatsoever they might be, which had thus thrown her in the companionship of the Chubb family.

Mrs. Chubb now made her appearance, in the form of a tall, gawky, lean woman, with a very sour aspect, and indeed a forbidding look. She was only half dressed, and was in her night-cap,—having evidently emerged from her couch.

"I am sure if I had expected this," she exclaimed, "when I went to bed, ill as I was, and asked you, Miss Vincent, to have the kindness to sit up for him——But see how the drunken brute is leaning against them railings! Isn't he a pretty feller to stand up to-morrow and ask others to jine in with him in singing to the praise and glory of God? Why, he'll have his eyes so bleared, and red, and blinking, that he'll look like an owl in an ivy bush. Come along, do!"—and she wound up her tirade by clutching her husband by the arm and shaking him violently.

Mr. Chubb, who evidently stood in mortal awe of his wife, was a trifle sobered by her presence and by the shaking process: so that he was enabled to stagger into the house.

"Thank'ee, young gentleman, for your attention," said Mrs. Chubb to our hero.

"Good night, sir," said Miss Vincent, in the sweet music of her soft voice.

"Good night," answered Christian: and as the door closed behind him, he walked slowly away,—his imagination full of the beautiful creature whom he had thus seen at the parish clerk's house.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BOX.

PRECISELY at nine o'clock on the ensuing Tuesday evening, Christian Ashton arrived in a cab at Madame Angelique's establishment. He alighted; and entering the shop, which was not as yet closed, gave his name to Madame Angelique's French deputy, who was behind the counter. The woman seemed at once to understand what she had to do; and in her broken English, she informed Christian that if he would return to the cab, the box he had been sent for should be immediately brought out to him. In a few minutes this woman herself appeared, carrying the box,—which was a large deal one, carefully corded; and the key was sealed up in a little parcel, which was likewise consigned to Christian's care.

The cab drove away; and as the driver had previously received his instructions from our hero, he proceeded straight to Mortimer Street. Mr. Redcliffe was at home, expecting Christian; and the youth himself carried the box up-stairs to Mr. Redcliffe's sitting-apartment. He received a cordial welcome from that gentleman, who also inquired most kindly after his sister.

"I saw her this morning, sir," replied Christian; "and she was quite well. She is however naturally grieved at the circumstance of my leaving town; because we shall be separated for a whole month. And now, Mr. Redcliffe, I have brought the box according to your instructions: and here is a little packet containing the key."

Redcliffe took the packet—examined the seal—and found that it was a common one, impressed by a stone that had no device nor initials upon it. He unhesitatingly broke open the packet—took forth the key—and bade Christian uncord the box. This was speedily done; and Mr. Redcliffe then said, "I have before observed to you, Christian, that we are engaged in an enterprise which will not permit us to be over scrupulous or fastidious in the course we pursue. It is better that we should be guilty of a slight violation of the sanctity of seals and locks, than tamely and

quietly suffer an amiable and virtuous lady to become the victim of the most nefarious conspiracy."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Redcliffe unlocked the box; and when he raised the lid, the contents were found to consist of beautiful female dresses.

"After all," said Christian, "this box seems to furnish no such clue, sir, as you doubtless expected to discover."

But scarcely were these words spoken, when one of the servants of the house made her appearance; and Mr. Redcliffe at once closed the lid of the box, before she had an opportunity of catching a glimpse of its contents.

"If you please, sir," she said, "a young lady is inquiring for you. She gives the name of Miss Eveleen O'Brien."

"Let her be shown up," responded Mr. Redcliffe, in that curt manner with which he was frequently accustomed to issue his orders: then, the moment the door was closed behind the servant, he said to Christian, "The arrival of this young person is most opportune. I did not expect her until to-morrow: but she doubtless brings us some important intelligence."

The door again opened; and Eveleen made her appearance. She stopped short on finding that Mr. Redcliffe was not alone: but he hastened to take her hand, saying in a hurried whisper, "Fear not!—this youth is in my confidence. You have fulfilled your promise—you have left that den of infamy—and henceforth you shall find a friend in me."

Eveleen murmured her gratitude; and Mr. Redcliffe, making her sit down, said to her, "Now, Miss O'Brien, have the goodness to communicate whatsoever you may have to impart."

"I have succeeded in discovering, sir," responded the young Irish girl, "that for the last six days the establishment has been busy in making up certain elegant dresses which are exact counterparts of others previously made for the Duchess of Marchmont. As much secrecy has been observed as Madame Angelique could possibly maintain in the matter: but as you may suppose, the affair has created no little surprise amongst the girls engaged in the work. It is very certain that the Duchess of Marchmont herself did not order these counterparts; because instructions have been issued to abstain from the slightest allusion thereto in her Grace's presence the next time her Grace visits the establishment."

"And do you happen to have seen these dresses?" inquired Mr. Redcliffe.

"Oh, yes!" responded Eveleen: "for inasmuch as the hands were so busy, I volunteered to render Madame Angelique a little assistance; and it was by these means that I got amongst the workwomen and discovered what I have told you."

"There is the box, Miss O'Brien," said Mr. Redcliffe: "have the kindness to examine its contents."

Eveleen did as she was desired; and at once pronounced the dresses to be precisely the same as those which she had seen making up as the duplicates of the costumes originally fashioned to the order of the Duchess of Marchmont.

Christian was bewildered by all that he thus heard; but Mr. Redcliffe threw upon him a significant look, as much as to imply that *he* was not altogether so much at a loss to fathom the mystery:—then again turning to Miss O'Brien, he said, "One of your companions—Lettice Rodney, I think her name is—has either left you, or is going to leave?"

"She has already left, sir," answered Eveleen: "she went away the first thing this morning. She did not say whither she was going—nor how long she should be absent."

"I know whither she is going," responded Mr. Redcliffe. "Now, Christian, you must take your departure; but before you go I have a few words to say to you:"—then drawing the youth aside, he whisperingly went on to observe, "To-morrow morning you leave for Oaklands. I also shall repair into that neighbourhood in the course of to-morrow. At a distance of about two miles thence, on the Winchester road, there is a turnpike. If you can possibly manage to meet me there on Saturday next, at three o'clock in the afternoon, I shall be glad to see you. But if not, then for each successive day, at the same hour, shall I be sauntering on the spot—until you make your appearance. Take care and use all possible circumspection: watch well the proceedings of the Duke—but beware how you excite suspicion."

Having given these instructions, Mr. Redcliffe directed Christian to cord up the box again; while he himself re-sealed the packet containing the key,—impressing it with a blank stamp which he had in his possession. Our young hero then took his departure, bearing the box with him to Marchmont House in Belgrave Square.

When he was gone, Mr. Redcliffe bade Eveleen excuse him for a few minutes; and he descended to Mrs. Macaulay's parlour. It was now about half-past nine o'clock; and the worthy woman was quietly and comfortably supping off the remainder of a pigeon-pie which had been served up at Mr. Redcliffe's dinner-table. She was therefore for a moment discomfited when that gentleman, having knocked at her door, immediately entered before she had even time to say, "Come in."

But Mrs. Macaulay was by no means the woman to be long thrown off her guard: and rising from her seat, she put on her very best smiles—cast a glance at the mirror to assure herself that her cap with pink ribbons sat properly on her head—and exclaimed, "Well, Mr. Redcliffe, this *is* an honour! It's the first time that you have entered my parlour since the day you took my lodgings. But pray sit down, sir. You see I am just picking a little bit. The fact is, my dear sir, I had *two* pigeon-pies made—one for you, and one for myself——"

"And I wish you a very excellent appetite, my dear madam," said Mr. Redcliffe, as he took a chair.

Here were both joy and surprise for Mrs. Macaulay! He either believed her tale of the duplicate pies, or else, with the kindest consideration, he affected to believe it: and whichever were the case, it was all the same to the worthy woman. And then, too, he had addressed her so familiarly! "My dear madam!" It was the first time he had ever thus spoken to her—the first time he had ever used the word "dear" epithetically in respect to herself. A suspicion flashed to Mrs. Macaulay's mind. Could he possibly mean matrimony? Had the cap and pink ribbons which became her so

well, achieved a conquest? Well, certainly she was very lonely—and Mr. Redcliffe was enormously rich: *he* also was lonely: and what could be more natural than that he should make her an offer? what more natural than that she should accept it?

All these ideas crowded one upon another through the ingenious brain of Mrs. Macaulay: she smiled and simpered—rose from her seat—produced a bottle of wine (that at one-and-three from the oilman's in the next street)—and was even about to invite Mr. Redcliffe to sup off his own pie, when he waved his hand in deprecation of these preparatives, and proceeded to explain himself.

"The fact is, my dear madam," he said, choosing to be civil in order to conciliate her, as it was rather a delicate boon he was about to supplicate at her hands,—"you can render me a service."

Here Mrs. Macaulay's countenance suddenly became grave, as the hope of matrimony vanished from her mind in an instant.

"But a service, be it understood," proceeded Mr. Redcliffe, "for which I am prepared to pay liberally."

Here Mrs. Macaulay's countenance suddenly brightened up again: for the idea of payment was always a welcome one; and the assurance of liberality in making it, was at all events to a certain degree a salve for the feelings that had just been wounded by disappointment.

"I am sure," she said, "that any service I could render Mr. Redcliffe, shall be cheerfully performed; and I know very well, my dear sir, that you are generous in your recompenses."

"A few words will suffice for explanation," said Mr. Redcliffe. "Accident has enabled me to rescue a young woman from a position into which villany inveigled her. She is genteel and well educated; and I am in hopes of being shortly enabled to restore her to the bosom of her family. But in the meantime I have business of my own to attend to, and which will to-morrow take me out of town—for I know not exactly how long. Now, I must provide Miss O'Brien—for that is her name—with a home."

"And I am sure, sir," Mrs. Macaulay hastened to exclaim, "she can have a comfortable home here. I will be like a mother to her——anything for your sake, and to give you pleasure!"

"Very good, Mrs. Macaulay," observed Redcliffe: "then the matter is settled. Trust to my liberality for your recompense. Watch over this young woman—let her go out as little as possible—and never alone. If her abode be discovered, attempts may be made to inveigle her away, or perhaps to carry her off by force. If when I return I find that she has gone, I shall ascribe all the fault to you: but if she be still with you, your reward shall be munificent. You understand me? Perhaps I ought to add for your own satisfaction, that this young woman is nothing more to me than an object of sympathy and of Christian charity."

"Oh, dear me, sir!" cried Mrs. Macaulay, "it is by no means necessary for you to give me such an assurance! Your character is quite sufficient as a guarantee in that respect. Let the dear creature be introduced to me; and I will treat her with the utmost kindness."

"She will want clothes and pocket-money," continued Mr. Redcliffe: "for inasmuch as she has fled from the place where she has been living, she has brought nothing with her. See that all her wants be attended to."

Thus speaking, Mr. Redcliffe flung some bank-notes upon the table; and hastening up-stairs, speedily re-appeared with Eveleen, whom he presented to Mrs. Macaulay.

Meanwhile Christian Ashton had returned to Marchmont House; and according to the instructions he had received from his ducal employer, he labelled the box in his own name. His preparations for departure in the morning being made, he soon retired to rest. The image of the beautiful Miss Vincent continued uppermost in his mind,—as indeed it had done ever since he beheld her a few nights previously. Three whole days had now elapsed since then; and he had longed to call at Mr. Chubb's on some pretext in order to see her again: but he had not dared to do so, inasmuch as a fitting excuse was wanting. The fact is, Christian was in love with the charming Miss Vincent,—though he did not comprehend the state of his own feelings, nor for a moment suspect the real truth.

The morning dawned upon a night of dreams, in which the image of that fair girl was ever prominent; and having received a supply of money from Mr. Calvert, the Duke's steward, Christian took his departure by the coach for Oaklands, the deal box being amongst his own luggage. It was about two in the afternoon that the coach set him down at the porter's lodge at the entrance of the long sweep of avenue which led through the spacious park. The trees in this January season were denuded of their leaves: but nevertheless, to one who had just arrived from that brick-and-mortar wilderness which constitutes London, the aspect of the spacious domain, with the antique-looking mansion on an eminence in the centre, was cheerful and refreshing. The porter's son—a stalwart lad of about eighteen—shouldered Christian's luggage, and led the way up to the mansion, where our young hero was at once installed in the chamber which he was to occupy. Here, as at Marchmont House, he was to take his meals in the steward's room; and thus there was to be no change in the actual comforts of his position in the Duke's employment.

Having notified his arrival to the Duke of Marchmont, he was sent for in the course of the afternoon into his Grace's presence—and was immediately questioned in respect to the box. He replied that he had brought it with him, and handed the Duke the little packet containing the key.

"You have faithfully executed my instructions," said his Grace; "and I am well pleased with you. No questions were asked in London about the box—I mean by the servants at Marchmont House?"

"None, my lord," replied Christian.

"Good!" said the Duke. "Keep the box for a day or two in your room; and I will then let you know how to dispose of it. Ah! by the bye, Christian, your time will be pretty much your own at Oaklands: for as I have come hither to enjoy myself, I do not mean to be troubled more than I can help with correspondence and so forth."

Christian bowed and withdrew. He presently learnt that the Hon. Mr. Stanhope was at Oaklands—but that there were no other guests. He also learnt, in a casual manner from the steward, that it was very seldom the Duke of Marchmont paid Oaklands a visit,—his Grace generally giving the preference to country-seats which he possessed in other counties.

"But this," said Mr. Purvis, the steward, "is scarcely to be wondered at, when we consider the painful impression which the tragedy that took place here seventeen or eighteen years ago, was but too well calculated to make upon his Grace's mind,—an impression which could scarcely wear off altogether, even at this distance of time. You see, Mr. Ashton," continued the steward, who was an old man and disposed to be garrulous, "it was not altogether so much the late Duke's death —he was murdered, you know, poor man!—that so cruelly afflicted his present Grace; but it was the circumstance that this murder was perpetrated by his Grace's own brother!"

"I have read the sorrowful account," said Christian; "and it much shocked me. Have any tidings ever been received of Mr. Bertram Vivian, who committed the murder?"

"None," answered old Purvis. "Of course Mr. Bertram went off at once with the Duchess—I dare say to America, where he had been before; and it is to be supposed they took another name, and did all they could to conceal themselves."

"Were you here at the time of the tragedy?" inquired Christian.

"Yes—I was indeed," responded the old man, shaking his head mournfully. "I was butler then; and it was me and our late Duke's own valet—Leachley by name—who discovered the body of our poor master. One of these days I will take and show you the spot. Ah! Mr. Ashton, it was a shocking thing—a very shocking thing! Of all the servants who were here at the time, I am the only one that now remains. The others have got scattered abroad in one way or another—some risen in the world—some married——in short, I don't know how it has been, but I am the only one left. Ah! talking of Leachley, the late Duke's valet—he married a farmer's daughter about a dozen miles from here; and when the old man died, he took the farm. He has got on well. I see him sometimes: he rides over to the old place to pay me a visit. It's dull enough, I can assure you—accustomed as I was for so long a period of my life, to have the family here for at least half of every year—and such gaieties and festivities!"

"And was the Duchess Eliza very beautiful?" inquired Christian.

"Beautiful?" said the old man: "it is scarcely the word. She was the loveliest creature I ever set eyes upon. But ah! how wicked of her to lose herself with Mr. Bertram—though it did appear they had loved each other before her marriage with the Duke. These are sad topics to converse upon; and yet I don't know how it is, Mr. Ashton, but the saddest topics are sometimes those which one likes to talk of most. Ah, by the bye, I forgot to tell you—speaking of the servants who were here at the time—that there was one young woman—her name was Jane—she was her Grace's principal lady's-maid—she loved her Grace dearly—and when it all took place, the poor creature showed signs of going mad. She did go mad too, a short time after the inquest, and was sent home to her friends. I never heard what became of her: but I should have liked to know, poor thing!"

Again the old butler paused and shook his head gloomily.

"But was it quite certain after all," inquired Christian, "that the Duchess Eliza was guilty in respect to Mr. Bertram Vivian? For I remember to have read in the account which accidentally fell into my hands a little while back——"

"Ah! I think I know to what you allude, Mr. Ashton," interrupted the old steward. "Yes—the late Duke did proclaim his wife's innocence—did declare that he had wronged her; and he dispersed us all about in search of her when she fled from the house. For the moment we rejoiced at the idea of her Grace's innocence: for she was beloved by us all. But then came the murder: and who could have murdered the Duke but Bertram Vivian? and why should he have murdered him, if not to possess himself of his wife? And why should both have disappeared and never since have been heard of? Is it not clear that they fled together?—and if that was the case, must they not have been previously too intimate? Besides, it appeared in the newspapers that the Duke said he had wronged his wife; and she must have seen it—and if she was innocent would she not have come forward?"

"True!" said Christian, with mournfulness of tone and look: for in the natural magnanimity of his character and in the chivalric generosity of his disposition, he would much rather have believed that the beautiful Duchess Eliza, to whose name so sad a romantic interest attached itself, was really innocent.

"Yes, yes—she was guilty," proceeded the old steward: "there can be no doubt about it. I don't know what it was that made the poor Duke suddenly think otherwise: but I *do* know that the present Duke behaved most admirably in the matter, and did all he could to soften down his uncle's feelings and effect a reconciliation. Ah! you should have seen his Grace—I mean the present Duke—when he gave his evidence at the inquest——how he was overcome by his feelings!—for he loved his brother Bertram dearly. Ah! when I think of it, it brings tears into my eyes. But the evidence was too convincing. The dog, you know, had torn off a piece of the murderer's coat—which was proved to have been that of Mr. Bertram. And then too there was the dagger——it is still here at Oaklands, Mr. Ashton," added the steward in a low voice; "and one of these days I will show it to you."

When Christian was again alone, he thought to himself what a pity it was that the Duke of Marchmont should have become so changed from the admirable character he appeared to have been at the time of the tragedy. *Then*, as all accounts concurred in representing, he exhibited the most generous feelings and the most magnanimous disposition: but *now* how different was he!—darkly and treacherously compassing the ruin of the beautiful and virtuous woman whom he had sworn at the altar to love, cherish, and protect! Christian was shocked when he reflected on the contrast between the man of the time of the tragedy, and the man of the present day.

On the following morning Purvis, the steward, accompanied Christian in a ramble through the grounds. The old man had never been married, and had no relations on the face of the earth—at least not to his knowledge. He possessed a kindly disposition, and easily attached himself to any one whom he had reason to esteem. He had already taken a fancy to Christian—was pleased with the youth's manners—and gratified by the attention with which his garrulity was listened to. Leaning on our young hero's arm, he walked with him through the grounds, pointing out particular spots of interest. He then led him along the road by the side of which the Duke's corpse was discovered; and he indicated the very pond on the edge of which the unfortunate nobleman had been thus found, with his face downward, one of his hands in the water, and the dagger sticking in his back. Christian shuddered; and the steward perceived that he thus trembled with horror.

"The country-people in these parts," said old Purvis, "will not, if they can avoid it, pass this spot after dusk. They say, Mr. Ashton, that a strange unearthly shape has been seen moving round about the pond—and that the low howlings of a dog have been heard. Of course I don't believe it myself: I am not superstitious; and yet if ever the dead did walk, the murder of the poor Duke was horrible enough to make his restless spirit return to the scene of so foul an assassination."

The old man and our young hero retraced their way slowly towards the mansion,—on approaching which they perceived the Hon. Mr. Stanhope walking with the Duchess in the grounds. Christian glanced towards the steward, to see whether the spectacle produced any effect upon him: but Purvis, suspecting no evil, took it quite as a matter of course; and therefore Christian made no remark.

It was about half-past ten in the evening, that our hero retired to his chamber somewhat fatigued —as he had rambled about, either with the old steward or else alone, for the greater portion of the day. He was beginning to undress himself, when he heard the door gently open; and the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance.

"Ah! I am just in time," said his Grace, closing the door behind him, "to prevent you from getting to bed. I want you to do me a little service to-night. What it is I will explain presently. In about an hour I will return. Light your fire—I see that it is laid in the grate—and amuse yourself with a book till I come back to you."

Having thus spoken, the Duke of Marchmont retired; and Christian could not help associating the as yet unexplained service with the box containing the counterpart dresses. He lighted the fire: he had now no longer the least inclination for sleep—he was anxious to ascertain the next step that was to be taken in the conspiracy wherein the Duke was embarked, but which he himself was secretly studying, in connexion with Redcliffe, to frustrate. He took up a volume, and whiled away the time until close upon midnight,—when the door again opened and the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance. His Grace was enveloped in a cloak and had his hat on: it was therefore evident he was going out somewhere.

"Now, my young friend," he said, patting Christian familiarly on the back, and speaking to him also in a more familiar manner than he had ever yet adopted towards his young secretary, "you are to do me the service I require. I see that I can trust you in everything—as indeed I ought to be enabled to do; for a secretary, you know, is always a confidential person, and from whom an employer is not disposed to keep things secret. Besides, you displayed so much discretion in the way you managed the little business I entrusted to you previous to my departure from London, that comparatively trifling though it were, the result has been to win for you my esteem. I think I told you, Christian," continued the Duke of Marchmont, now affecting to speak in a careless off-hand manner, "that the box contains certain little presents which I am anxious to make; and they are for the principal tenants' wives and daughters on my estates. I mean to surprise some of them, so that they sha'n't know from whom the things come. It is a freak of mine—and I have my own way of carrying it out. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," answered Christian, preserving his countenance as changeless as possible. "It is for your Grace to give your orders, and I am ready to obey them."

"You are going a little distance with me," proceeded Marchmont; "and I must trouble you to bring the box along with you. It is not very heavy. Indeed it only contains gown-pieces of silk and muslin—a few shawls, caps, and cambric pocket-handkerchiefs—and those kind of trifles that Madame Angelique can supply as tastefully as she can richer and costlier things."

Christian knew that Marchmont was giving utterance to as complete a tissue of falsehoods as ever were unblushingly poured forth. He however said not a word; but hastily putting on an upper coat and his hat, shouldered the box,—having previously torn off the label in compliance with a hint to that effect on the part of his Grace. The Duke extinguished the candle that was burning in the room, whence he led the way, and conducted Christian to the private staircase in another part of the spacious building. This they descended: the Duke opened the door at the bottom, by means of a key which he had about him; and they issued forth into the grounds.

The night was dark and windy. No moon was visible on the face of heaven—no stars were twinkling: but sombre clouds were flying fast high over head. The skeleton branches of the trees were dimly perceptible through the obscurity: the evergreen shrubs, dotting the garden at frequent intervals, looked like human shapes. Through the grounds the Duke led the way in silence,—Christian carrying the box; and they soon entered upon that very road along which Mr. Purvis, the old steward, had conducted our hero in the morning, and by the side of which was the pond where the fatal tragedy was enacted.

"The night is bitter cold," said the Duke, at length breaking silence. "The wind is high too. You seem to stagger beneath the box?"

"Not at all, my lord," answered Ashton. "But how strangely the wind moans! It really seems as if it were the voice of the dead—or rather of the dying."

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Marchmont: "the wind

is natural enough in its sounds. Never give way to superstitious thoughts."

A silence again ensued: but as they approached the spot where Christian knew the pond was situated, he could not prevent a certain gloomy sensation from creeping over him. It was not that he was naturally superstitious: very far from it;—but he had been told by Purvis that the country-people of those parts reported strange sights to have been seen and strange noises to have been heard in the neighbourhood of that pond, and that they did not choose to pass it after dusk. But even setting aside these circumstances, Christian knew that a horrible murder had been perpetrated on the brink of that pond; and the consciousness thereof was not calculated to engender very agreeable associations. And now too, he could not help thinking that it was indelicate to a degree, and indicative of a hardened mind on the part of the Duke of Marchmont, to be threading this very road and passing by that very spot, when evidently engaged in taking some step in the carrying out of a foully designed treachery.

While thus engaged in thought, Christian became aware, by a particular turning of the road, that they were now in the close vicinage of the pond; and it was not without a shudder that in a few moments he caught sight of the water which was dimly glimmering in the obscurity of the night. But he said nothing. He felt that if the Duke were thus hardened enough to pass the spot when intent on deeds of evil, he himself would not be indelicate enough to make the slightest allusion to a tragedy which ought to be so memorable in the Marchmont family. He perceived however that the Duke quickened his pace as he passed by the pond—so that Christian had some little difficulty in keeping up with him, the box on his shoulder forming a resistance to the gushing wind which blew right against it. Marchmont however soon slackened his pace again; and at a distance of about a hundred yards beyond the scene of the murder, he struck into a bye lane,—Christian following him. A short distance down this lane there appeared a tolerably-sized farm-house, with a little garden in front. The Duke opened the gate and passed on to the entrance, with Christian close behind. The obscurity was not too great to prevent our hero from perceiving that the place had a sombre and desolate look. There was the farm-yard—but quiet as the grave: and yet the gate had swung back with a din which would have aroused the cackling of geese and ducks, or the barking of a dog, if any were there.

The Duke knocked at the door: it was presently opened by an old woman with tottering gait, and whose head shook as if she had the palsy. She carried a light in her hand: and evidently recognising the Duke in a moment, said something which Christian did not catch. His Grace answered her quickly—as if by the very rapidity as well as brevity of his utterance enjoining her to silence; and then he bade Christian deposit the box in the passage. This the youth did; and the Duke at once hurried him away from the place.

They now retraced their steps down the lane into the road,—our hero wondering the while for what earthly reason the box could have been taken to that lonely destination. The Duke said nothing; and they walked on together. Again they were approaching the pond: but when just within sight of it, an ejaculation burst from our young hero's lips; and under the influence of the sudden feeling which thus smote him, he caught the Duke forcibly by the arm.

"Look, look, my lord!" he said: "that shape!"

And sure enough a dark shape was moving in the vicinage of the pond. It was no delusion—it was palpable—a human form seen through the obscurity, darker than the darkness!

"Ah!" and the Duke stopped short.

The next moment the shape thus seen, moved away from the pond round the bend of the road, and was absorbed in the obscurity of the night.

"It is nothing," said the Duke: but Christian thought that his Grace spoke in a tone which was more or less troubled. "It is some wayfarer. Let us see."

His Grace proceeded onward at a rapid rate,—Christian keeping up with him. Had the traveller—if it were one—been going at anything like a moderate rate, he must have been overtaken: but no one was to be seen.

"I dare say he has cut across the fields," said the Duke of Marchmont, after a while relaxing his pace again: then as if stricken by a sudden thought, he demanded of Christian, "Why were you frightened? what made you clutch me as if in such terror?"

"I beg your Grace's pardon," said our young hero: "I know it was a great liberty on my part——"

"No, no—I did not allude to it in that light," said Marchmont: "you of course could not help it—you were smitten with alarm—and that is the truth of it—eh?"

"I confess that it was so, my lord," rejoined Christian. "The fact is, I walked this way in the morning; and Mr. Purvis, who was with me, pointed out the spot——"

"Ah! and I dare say," exclaimed the Duke, "he told you the old gossips' tales about the place. Deeply as I revere the memory of my deceased uncle, yet I am not given, Christian, to superstitious terrors. It is weak and unmanly to yield to them. I counselled you against such influences as we were coming along the road ere now: remember my advice for the future."

A silence ensued; and in a short time the grounds of the mansion were reached.

"I need not say, my young friend," observed the Duke, in a low tone, "that our midnight expedition is to be kept entirely secret. Of course you understand this much. You see that I trust you; and you must in every sense render yourself worthy of my confidence. Ah! by the bye, when I think of it—the maid who does out your room may notice the absence of the box. Should she allude to it in your presence, you can easily devise some excuse—that you sent it back to London by the coach—or off somewhere by the carrier, for some purpose or another——anything, in short, that comes into your head. It will be a little falsehood that is venial enough, and will all the more effectually assist the carrying out of my freakish project."

At this moment the door of the secret staircase was reached: the Duke opened it by means of the key which he had about him; and wishing Christian "good night," he retired to his own apartment, while our hero sought his chamber to ponder

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upon all that had occurred—for he certainly felt but little inclination for sleep.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LETTICE RODNEY.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning following the night of which we have been speaking, that Lettice Rodney awoke in a chamber around which her eyes slowly wandered with an expression as if she were not over well satisfied with her quarters. It was a large room, furnished in an antiquated style, and of gloomy aspect,—though some recent preparations had evidently been made to give it an air of comfort. The latticed windows were small; the ceiling was low; the walls were of wainscot; the chairs were of a dark wood, massive and heavy. The same might be said of the bedstead: but the bedding materials themselves were all new; and these, together with the draperies, were of a superior quality to the other appointments of the chamber. It was this circumstance which indicated how recent arrangements had been made to render the place more habitable than it would otherwise have been.

Lettice Rodney awoke, as we have said, at about nine o'clock: and looking around her, she seemed smitten with the gloom of her quarters. In a few minutes, however, when she grew more completely awake, a smile appeared upon her exceedingly handsome countenance, as she murmured to herself, "But, after all, it is a change and a novelty; and I am to be most munificently recompensed?"

She raised herself up in the couch—rested her elbow upon the pillow—and sustained her head with her hand. In that position she would have formed an admirable study for the pencil of an artist. No corset now imprisoned the contours of her shape, which therefore took their own natural and voluptuous developments. Her glossy brown hair floated negligently over the hand which sustained her head, and over the shoulders which were covered with the snowy night-dress. Pleasure and dissipation had not marred the gorgeous beauty of her form: the rounded and full undulations of the bust retained their proper position, as if all the freshness of youth had remained associated with the exuberant charms of a superb womanhood. The sweeping length of her limbs was delineated by the bed-clothes: all the flowing outlines of her form were traceable, and could be followed by the eye, if an observer had been present. The semi-languor which accompanies the first few minutes of the morn's awakening, gave a certain expression of sensuousness to her countenance,—or rather softly deepened that which it habitually wore. She was a splendid creature, well-grown and fresh coloured; but the fulness of her contours stopped short just at that degree of luxuriance when they touched upon *embonpoint*—while the hue upon her cheeks was not the ruddiness of the rustic hoyden, but the carnation glow upon a finely grained skin. Her lips were of coral redness—habitually moist—and seeming to invite fervid kisses, as well as to be enabled to give them back with a kindred ardour. Her teeth were somewhat large, but of ivory whiteness and faultlessly even: her nose was straight—her forehead high. It has already been stated that she was about two-and-twenty; and since the age of fifteen had she dwelt under the evil auspices of Madame Angelique. Her temperament was naturally luxurious: she had fallen an easy victim to the wiles of that abominable woman; and as she was an orphan, she had no happy home to regret. On the contrary: of the four females whom we introduced to the reader at the milliner's establishment, Lettice was the one least accessible to remorseful feelings, and most inclined to abandon herself fully and completely to the mode of existence she was pursuing.

She lay half-reclining upon her pillow in that apartment around which her eyes wandered by no means lovingly at first: yet, as we have seen, she consoled herself quickly enough for this change in her quarters, by the reflection that there was novelty in it, and that she was embarking in some adventure which would remunerate her well, though she as yet scarcely comprehended the precise nature of the services required at her hands. While she lay thinking, the door opened slowly; and an old woman, with trembling limbs, and head shaking as if it were palsied, made her appearance. She was followed by a buxom-looking young girl of about seventeen, and who was the old woman's granddaughter. This girl carried a large deal box, which was corded, and which she set down upon the floor.

"Ah! then," said Lettice, as she beheld the box, "some one has been this morning?"

"No, ma'am—it was in the middle of the night," answered the old woman: and in a mysterious manner, she added, "It was the Duke himself, together with a young gentlemau. His Grace told me yesterday morning—as I think I mentioned to you, ma'am—that I was to sit up, as it was most likely some one would be calling."

"I must have slept soundly enough, Mrs. Norwood," observed Lettice: "for I heard no noise of doors opening. I shall get up now. And Phœbe," she added, addressing herself to the girl, "see that you get me the best breakfast you can possibly accomplish. But, dear me, what a place this is—so lonely and desolate!"

"Ah! it was once thriving enough, ma'am," said Mrs. Norwood, "when the late farmer had it."

"And how long has the place been in this condition?" inquired Lettice.

"Oh! upward of the last twelve months, or so," responded the old woman. "His Grace's bailiff let me and my granddaughter live here for nothing, just to keep the rooms aired and take care of the furniture, till some new tenant comes. You see, ma'am, the person who had it last, was a bachelor; and he went on at such a pace he soon got ruined and was sent to gaol for debt, where he died of a fever brought on by hard drinking. There was more than a year's rent owing; and so his Grace's bailiff kept the furniture in the house. All the farm stock was sold off; and now there isn't so much as a hen to lay an egg. However, thanks to his Grace's liberality, there is everything in the place to make you comfortable, ma'am, while you are here."

The old woman withdrew, followed by her grand-

daughter: Lettice rose and dressed herself; and on descending to a parlour on the ground-floor, she found an excellent repast in readiness. Scarcely had she finished, when the Duke of Marchmont arrived at the house.

"I am glad that you have come," said Lettice, as he entered the room: and she spoke half poutingly, half smilingly: "for really you have consigned me to an abode of incomparable dulness."

"But everything is done, my dear girl, to conduce to your comfort," said his Grace, tapping her familiarly on the cheek. "I ordered these people to attend to your slightest wants, and even to anticipate them. After all, you do not look so very unhappy; and you certainly are not pining away. On the contrary, the fresh air of the country has brought a richer colour to your cheeks; and they invite what I am now about to bestow upon them."

Thus speaking, the Duke kissed each plump and carnation-hued cheek; and then, by way of variety, he paid a similar compliment to the dewy richness of Lettice Rodney's lips.

"And now that you have thus refreshed yourself, my dear Marchmont," she laughingly and familiarly said, "perhaps you will have the kindness to enter a little more deeply into explanations than you have hitherto done? The box of dresses has arrived, I find——"

"And to-morrow evening, one must be made use of," rejoined the Duke. "Listen to me attentively, my dear Lettice; and I will tell you precisely how you are to act."

Marchmont then detailed such explanations as were requisite for the furtherance of his treacherous scheme: but it is not consistent with the immediate requirements of our narrative that we should chronicle them. Suffice it to observe that Lettice Rodney promised to fulfil the Duke's instructions on all points; and she received from him an earnest of his munificence in the form of a small casket containing several exquisite and costly articles of jewellery.

"To-morrow night, therefore, my dear Lettice!" said the Duke, as he rose to take his departure. "But recollect that you do not stir abroad in the daytime: you can take plenty of exercise in the large enclosed garden at the back of the house. I took care," he continued, glancing towards some book-shelves, "to provide you with numerous novels and interesting works: and, by the bye, I have brought you a quantity of newspapers."

Thus speaking, his Grace drew forth a packet of journals, which he placed upon the table; and after a little more conversation, he took his departure. Presently the young woman Phœbe entered the room to clear away the breakfast-things; and Lettice, who was standing at the window, inquired, "What is the distance from the bottom of this lane to Oaklands?"

"I should think about a mile and a quarter," was Phœbe Norwood's response. "If you are going there, ma'am, you can't possibly mistake the road: it is pretty nearly straight—except close by the pond, where the late Duke was murdered; and there it takes a sort of turn."

"Ah!" ejaculated Lettice, with a shudder: "the pond where the late Duke was murdered is on the road-side?"—and then she said to herself, "A comfortable spot to pass at night-time!"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," rejoined Phœbe: "that's the spot where his Grace was murdered a matter of eighteen years ago, or thereabouts. Grandmother says," she added in a half-hushed voice, "that he walks."

"What do you mean?" inquired Lettice hastily.

"I mean, ma'am," answered the girl, "that the late Duke's ghost haunts the place; and what's more, the howlings of his dog have been heard at the same spot in the night-time."

"How absurd!" ejaculated Lettice; but a shade nevertheless came over her countenance—and for the remainder of the day she felt an oppression of spirits such as she had not experienced for a long, long time.

It must be observed that this day of which we have been writing, was Friday. On the following day Christian Ashton had to meet Mr. Redcliffe in the neighbourhood of the turnpike on the Winchester road. The weather was remarkably fine for that January season; and shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon of this Saturday, Christian set out on his walk from Oaklands. As he was proceeding through the grounds he perceived the Duchess of Marchmont walking with the Hon. Mr. Stanhope. She was not however leaning on his arm: nor was there aught in her look to denote that she experienced any particular pleasure in the society of her companion.

We have already said that Lavinia was in her thirty-second year—that she was tall and finely formed. Her hair was of a light auburn, which she habitually wore in massive tresses; and which, as they now floated beneath the simple straw-bonnet which she had put on for her ramble, formed a lustrous framework for a countenance of the most interesting beauty. Her profile was faultless. The forehead was high, and dazzlingly fair,—the delicate tracery of blue veins being visible beneath the pure transparent skin. Her nose was perfectly straight: the eyebrows, many shades darker than the hair, were finely arched. The large blue eyes had a soft and pensive expression: more beauteous eyes never graced a female countenance! The lashes were darker still than the brows, and thickly fringed the lids. Nothing could excel the classic chiselling of the lips, which were of bright vermilion; and when the Duchess smiled, those lips revealed two rows of teeth resembling pearls. The delicately rounded chin completed the oval of that beauteous countenance,—the complexion of which was chastely fair, with only the tint of the rose-leaf upon the cheeks. To gaze upon that charming face—to observe the goodness of disposition which the large blue eyes expressed—it would seem impossible that any man was possessed of a soul black enough to harbour evil thoughts against this lady. Indeed she possessed every charm of countenance and of figure, as well as of mind, to inspire admiration, love, and respect.

The symmetry of Lavinia's form was complete. Nothing could exceed the graceful arching of the neck, or the dazzling whiteness of the throat. The shoulders sloped gently, thus imperceptibly as it were blending with the arms. The bust was finely modelled, but modestly concealed by a dress with a high *corsage;* and this was the invariable style adopted by Lavinia, whose pure taste and delicacy of feeling would have revolted against any mere-

tricious display of her charms. Elegance was the principal characteristic of her gait and carriage; though her height, rather than her bearing, invested her with a certain degree of dignity. There was however about her none of that pride—much less that majesty of demeanour, which the imagination is apt to associate with the rank of a Duchess. Indeed, to gaze upon her one would have thought that a less brilliant sphere would have far better suited her tastes and disposition: though it must not be inferred from these observations, that she was deficient in any of the becoming qualities for the social position which she occupied.

As Christian passed Mr. Stanhope and the Duchess, he raised his hat; and her Grace bestowed upon him a kind word and a friendly smile. While continuing his way, he felt more than ever rejoiced that accident should have rendered him instrumental in discovering the diabolical plots which were in existence against the peace of mind of this amiable lady; and he had such confidence in the wisdom and determination of Clement Redcliffe, that he had no doubt as to the complete discomfiture of the conspirators. Hastening onward, he in a short time reached the turnpike; and at a little distance he beheld Mr. Redcliffe walking slowly along, enveloped in his cloak, and with his hat drawn more than ever over his countenance. After hasty greetings were exchanged, Redcliffe conducted Christian across the fields to a lonely little cottage, inhabited by an elderly couple; and here it appeared that he had taken up his quarters. His lodgings consisted of a small but neat parlour and a bed-chamber. The dwelling was altogether secluded; and Redcliffe gave Christian to understand that the elderly couple were not of prying or inquisitive dispositions, and that therefore he had been most fortunate in discovering such a retreat.

"And now, my young friend," he said, "what intelligence have you for me?"

Christian stated that Mr. Stanhope was at Oaklands, and that he daily walked out with the Duchess. He then proceeded to explain how the Duke of Marchmont had made him convey the box to the farm-house at a late hour on the Thursday night—and how it was left there. Christian also mentioned the circumstance of having seen some shape moving about in the vicinage of the pond during the walk homeward on the occasion referred to.

"I perceive," said Mr. Redcliffe, after having reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, "that the incident you have just related, produced some little sensation of awe upon your mind. But the Duke, you tell me, bade you be careful how you yielded to superstitious fears. I also repeat that advice; and perhaps I can give it with a clearer conscience than he. Yes, Christian, it was no doubt some wayfarer——or midnight wanderer," added Mr. Redcliffe slowly, "whose form you beheld upon that spot at that hour. But it is clear," he went on to observe, speaking more quickly, "that the plot is now progressing fast, and that the incidents are thickening. It is time that I should explain to you something which I had not the opportunity to do when you came to me last Tuesday evening. To my comprehension there is no mystery in respect to the box. You heard, from Eveleen O'Brien's lips, that it contained dresses which are the precise duplicates of others recently made for the Duchess of Marchmont. Those dresses, Christian, will be doubtless worn by some one who is to personate the Duchess——Ah! now you understand the full extent of the villany of which the Duke is capable!"

"I do indeed, sir," responded Christian; almost smitten with dismay as the light thus dawned in upon his mind. "But how will you frustrate this portion of the diabolical conspiracy?"

"Fear not, my young friend," answered Redcliffe. "Rest assured that innocence and virtue shall yet triumph over the most villanous treachery. Come to me again the moment you have anything fresh to impart: but if nothing should transpire for a few days, do not revisit me until the middle of the ensuing week. We must be upon our guard, so as to take no step that may excite suspicion."

After a little further discourse, Christian took his departure and returned to Oaklands.

It was about eleven o'clock in the night of this same day, that Lettice Rodney issued forth from the lonely farm-house. She wore an ample cloak over her dress: a thick veil covered her countenance. The night was beautiful and starlit: the air was frosty, with an invigorating freshness totally different from that damp chill which makes the form shiver and the teeth chatter. Quickly threading the lane, Lettice entered upon the road, —on gaining which she endeavoured to hum an opera-air to keep up her spirits, or rather to persuade herself that there was no superstitious terror in her mind as she pursued her way in a neighbourhood rendered so fearfully memorable by an appalling murder. All of a sudden, however, she stopped short and turned hastily round: for it struck her that she heard footsteps following over the hard frost-bound road. At the same instant that she thus looked back, she fancied that she caught a glimpse of some dark form disappearing in the shade of the hedge which skirted the road. She was not naturally a coward—very far from it: but she could not help trembling all over, half with a superstitious fear, and half with the dread lest some evil-disposed person should be dogging her footsteps. She was somewhat inclined to retrace her way to the farm-house: but this would be to abandon the enterprise in which she had embarked, and on account of which she had already received so signal a proof of the Duke of Marchmont's munificence. Therefore, mustering up all her courage, she continued her route.

In a few minutes she reached the pond which she knew to have been the spot where the murder was committed, although she was now threading this road for the first time. Through the folds of her veil her eyes glanced rapidly around; and she could scarcely keep back a scream as she beheld, either in fancy or reality, a dark shape on the opposite side of the hedge which bounded the pond. It instantaneously disappeared;—and speeding forward, Lettice strove hard to persuade herself that it was merely imagination.

"Nevertheless," she thought, "if these nocturnal journeys are to be frequently repeated, I must positively solicit his Grace to give me some escort. Not," she added, as she thus mused, "that I am afraid of preternatural appearances ——no, no—*that* is sheer nonsense!——but it is

not altogether safe thus to be out so late and in such a lonely road. Yes—assuredly it was only my imagination——and yet it was strange that I should twice fancy I beheld that dark shape!"

Lettice continued her way—but frequently glancing around, and ever and anon pausing to listen whether footsteps were in reality pursuing her. Nothing more however occurred to frighten her; and as she entered the grounds belonging to Oaklands, she felt ashamed of the apprehensions to which she had given way.

The Duke had so accurately described the exact path which she was to take through the shrubberies and the gardens, that she had no difficulty in following his instructions—especially as she was so well aided by the clear starlight. That starlight bathed the antique edifice in its argentine lustre, and made the tall chimneys and the pointed roofs stand out in bold relief against the blue sky. All was still, save the rustling of the evergreens as well as of her own dress, and the light tread of her footsteps as she bent her way towards the private door, which, as well as the other details of her route, had been accurately described by the Duke of Marchmont. On reaching that door, she gave three gentle taps; and it was immediately opened by the Duke himself. She entered: he closed the door—and conducted her into a little room opening from a passage. Here a light was burning; and he made her sit down and rest herself for a few minutes. He drew the cork of a champagne-bottle; and the exhilarating influence of the wine cheered her spirits to an extent that she resolved to keep silent as to the circumstances which had affrighted her during her walk from the farm-house.

She now, by the Duke's bidding, took off her bonnet and cloak; and she appeared in one of the dresses which had come down in the box.

"It is most fortunate," said Marchmont, "that her Grace wore the exact counterpart of that dress this evening. Now take the veil from the bonnet and just throw it over your head, so as to shade your countenance and cover the hair."

These instructions were obeyed; and the Duke said, "You must follow me on tiptoe. We shall not take the candle with us: but there will be light enough through the windows of the staircase and passages to enable you to see your way."

The Duke conducted Lettice Rodney up the private staircase along a passage: then they threaded another corridor,—thus reaching the extremity of the building, which was farthest from the one whence they had come.

"Here!" said the Duke: and gently tapping at a door, it was instantaneously opened by the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

Lettice passed in; and the Duke hastened away.

The principal lady's-maid of the Duchess of Marchmont, was a young woman named Amy Sutton. She was tall and handsome—about four-and-twenty years of age—and of very excellent character. She was however of a cold disposition, which often merged into a morose sullenness when with her fellow-servants; though she had never any occasion to display her humours in the presence of her mistress. She was selfish, worldly-minded, and calculating—exceedingly fond of money—but with a certain pride, rather than principle, which prevented her from stooping to any underhand or immoral means to augment her hoards. Though handsome, yet if closely regarded, it would be seen that she had a certain decision of look indicating much of her real disposition, and which at times became sinister in its aspect. If ever a fashionable rake or a patrician libertine, seizing an opportunity, ventured to pat her cheek, her eyes would flame up and her countenance would express a savage fierceness; and if an improper overture were whispered in her ear, she would unhesitatingly reward the individual with the soundest box that his own ear had ever received. She was too selfish in her disposition to entertain any real affection for her mistress—and too independent in character to simulate that which her heart did not feel. At the same time she was perfectly respectful in her conduct, as well as assiduous in her duties; and as the natural amiability of Lavinia prompted her to be kind and indulgent towards her dependants, Amy Sutton's temper was never put to the test by a word or look on the part of her mistress. Thus it was not difficult for Amy to conceal from her Grace whatsoever was rugged, worldly-minded, or sinister in her constitution; while her honesty, her unimpeachable character, and her regularity in performing her duties, rendered her more or less a favourite with her Grace.

It must here be observed that the Duchess of Marchmont, though of such high rank, was not one of those fine ladies who cannot do a single thing for themselves, and who require every detail of the toilet—morning, noon, evening, and night—to be performed by the hands of female attendants. Her Grace, on the contrary, dispensed as much as possible with the attentions of her maids on these points, and only invoked their aid for such services as she could not very well render unto herself. All this the Duke of course well knew: and he was therefore aware that when his wife retired for the night, she very speedily dismissed the attendant handmaid whose turn it was to be upon duty,—preferring to disapparel herself and arrange her hair with her own hands.

The Duchess had sought her chamber about half-an-hour previous to the introduction of Lettice Rodney into the mansion. It was Amy Sutton's turn to attend upon her Grace; and, as usual, she was dismissed for the night a few minutes after accompanying Lavinia to her chamber. Marchmont had watched from the end of the corridor—himself remaining unseen—until Amy quitted her Grace's room and ascended to her own; and then was it that he stole down the private staircase to await the three raps at the door which were to signalize Lettice Rodney's arrival. He was not kept long waiting, as the reader has seen.

Now that we have given these requisite explanations, we resume the thread of our narrative. Having introduced Lettice into Mr. Stanhope's chamber, the Duke of Marchmont stole up-stairs to the floor above, and knocked at Amy Sutton's door. The maid hastened to open it,—for she had not as yet begun to undress herself; and on hearing the summons, it immediately struck her that one of her fellow-domestics must be taken ill. She was surprised at beholding the Duke,—surprised only, but not startled: for it was in her nature to take things very coolly. For a moment

the thought struck her that his Grace was now visiting her for a particular purpose, which she would have resented in no measured terms: but this idea was immediately dissipated when a glance showed her how troubled appeared his countenance. Indeed, Marchmont had studiously put on an excited and agitated look; while perhaps a certain sense of the deep villany in which he was engaged, rendered his features pale, and gave an air of reality to the troubled look which he thus assumed.

Placing his finger upon his lip to enjoin silence, he beckoned the maid to follow him. This she unhesitatingly did: for she saw—or at least fancied she saw—that there was something wrong, and she had no fear of any improper treatment on the Duke's part,—in the first place, because he seemed to meditate nothing of the sort; and in the second place, because she had the fullest confidence in her own power to repulse and resent it, if he did. He had come without a light: she was at first about to follow with her own: but he made a sign for her to leave it; and she accompanied him down the staircase.

There was a sitting-room on the same floor as the principal bed-chambers of the establishment; and into this Marchmont led Amy.

"Young woman," he said, rendering his voice hoarse and thick, and speaking too in a low tone, as if he were indeed profoundly agitated,—"I do not for a minute imagine—I cannot suppose, indeed, that you are an accomplice——"

"In what, my lord?" asked Amy, somewhat indignantly. "I am an accomplice in nothing wrong."

"Be not offended!" was Marchmont's hasty response. "You will make allowances for me—you will pity me, when you learn the frightful truth!"

"What is it, my lord?" she demanded.

"Your mistress, Amy," rejoined Marchmont, now forcing himself to speak in accents of deep concentrated bitterness,—"your mistress is unfaithful to me!"

"No, my lord," replied Amy, firmly and indignantly.

"Ah! I do not blame you for thus thinking so well of her Grace. Good heavens! that such profligacy should be concealed by so much apparent meekness! Alas, it is too true, Amy—or else my eyes must have strangely deceived me! But tell me,—for I notice not such things generally—what kind of a dress was it that your mistress had on this evening? Was it such-a-one?"—and the Duke gave some explanations.

"Yes, my lord: that was certainly the dress," responded Amy Sutton. "But it is impossible——"

"I tell you it is but too true!" ejaculated the Duke, in a tone of passionate vehemence. "I was proceeding to my own chamber—the taper accidently went out—at that moment I heard light footsteps proceeding with unmistakable stealthiness along the passage. A suspicion that there was something wrong induced me to hide in a doorway and watch——"

"And then, my lord?" said Amy Sutton.

"And then I beheld your mistress proceed along that corridor; and she entered——good heavens! that I should have harboured such a villain——she entered, I tell you, the miscreant Stanhope's chamber!"

Naturally cold and unexcitable though Amy Sutton was, she could not help being startled by this intelligence; and when she gazed into the Duke's countenance — on which the starlight beamed through the window—she thought she read in his looks, which seemed wild and haggard, the fullest confirmation of the tale. Nevertheless, she said after a few minutes' silence, "It must be a mistake, my lord. Some other female——"

"But the dress, Amy?—how could I possibly be mistaken? The light pouring in through the casement at the end of the corridor, showed me the dress. It is true that your mistress seemed to have a veil upon her head——Does she possess a black veil?"

"Yes, my lord—several," responded Amy.

"Well then, she had a veil upon her head," continued the Duke, still speaking as if he were immensely troubled. "Alas, there cannot be a doubt of it! And now I recollect a thousand little things which have hitherto appeared trivial—a thousand little circumstances which only now assume an air of importance! Vainly have I invited Stanhope to ride out with me—to go hunting or shooting. No!—he has always had his excuses—he preferred remaining in the drawing-room——Oh, I shall go mad!"

The Duke paced to and fro in the apartment, with an agitation so well feigned, that Amy Sutton, shrewd though she were, could not for an instant suppose it to be a mere detestable hypocrisy. She however lost none of her habitual coolness; and stepping up to the Duke, who accordingly stopped short in his apparently agitated walk, she said, "Nothing is more easy, my lord, than to clear up this matter at once."

"To be sure!" he ejaculated, as if suddenly recalled to a sense of what he ought to do; "and that was my motive in fetching you from your room! Go, Amy, to her Grace's apartment. If you should happen to find her there——and God send that you may!—you can easily invent some excuse for the intrusion:"—but Marchmont perfectly well knew that Amy Sutton was not a person to undertake any such mission; or else he would have been careful to go upon some other tack.

"No my lord," she at once said in a firm and peremptory manner, "I will not run the risk of being blamed for an impertinent intrusion. It is for your lordship to go to your wife's apartment."

"No, no, Amy," he said, with the air of one who was distracted; "I am not sufficiently the master of my own actions! But we will watch——Yes! that will be the better plan. We will watch in the passage—we will see who it is that issues forth from Stanhope's chamber! I may have wrongly described the dress: but you will be enabled to tell me. Besides, as I have made you my confidante in this most deplorable as well as most delicate business, you must remain with me to keep such watch."

"I will, my lord," answered the young woman: "for I cannot help thinking there must be some terrible mistake. But supposing it should be as your Grace fears,—you will pardon me for advising that you take no precipitate step."

"Amy, I am in that state of mind," ejaculated Marchmont, "when any advice is most welcome—most useful! Your's shall be followed—and I thank you for it. Come!—we will watch at this door. Even if we stay for hours will we watch!"

Marchmont and Amy Sutton accordingly posted themselves at the door of the room where this conversation had taken place. They kept the door ajar in such a manner that they could both look forth into the corridor; and thus in a profound silence did about twenty minutes pass away. Then a door was heard to open gently at a little distance: the Duke nudged his companion as if in an excited manner; and she murmured, "Hush!" in the lowest possible tone.

Footsteps were heard stealing along the corridor—then the rustling of a dress; and in about a minute a figure passed with apparent cautiousness along. Of course the reader understands full well that this was none other than Lettice Rodney, who was acting in accordance with the instructions she had received from the Duke. The black veil was over her head in such a manner as to conceal her hair and shade her features: but there was quite sufficient light in the passage for Amy to recognise the dress; and when the figure had passed, she retreated a few steps into the room.

"Now, Amy," murmured the Duke, in a deep hollow voice, as he also quitted the door and closed it,—"what say you?"

"I am afraid, my lord, that there can be no doubt of it," she responded. "But is your Grace sure that you beheld my mistress enter Mr. Stanhope's room?"

"Can I doubt my own eyes?" asked the Duke: "and does not that stealthiness of proceeding which you have just witnessed—does it not, I say, confirm all I have told you?"

"And now what will your Grace do?" inquired Amy, who was indeed all but convinced that the mistress whom she had hitherto believed the very pattern of virtue, purity, and frankness, was the personification of profligacy, viciousness, and hypocrisy.

"What will I do?" cried the Duke:—"what in heaven's name *can* I do?" he asked, with the air of one who was bewildered and distracted. "It is true that for some time past her Grace and myself have not been on the very best terms together; and I dare say that I have been looked upon as a cruel and hard-hearted husband who ill-treated his wife. But if the world only knew the infirmities of her temper——However, I need not trouble you with such explanations. You ask me what I will do; and you have counselled me to take no precipitate step——"

"And this advice, my lord, I respectfully but earnestly venture to repeat," said Amy Sutton.

"It shall be followed—rest assured that it shall be followed!" responded the Duke. "I will create no disturbance; whatever is to be done, shall be performed in a suitable and becoming manner. A divorce——this is the only course!"

"And yet, my lord," said Amy, "there is still the possibility of some mistake: for remember that I have not seen her Grace issue from Mr. Stanhope's chamber."

"True!" ejaculated the Duke, as if now struck by the fact for the first time. "I will do nothing rashly!—I will think over it! Do you return to your own room. I need not enjoin you to keep the dreadful affair secret until secresy becomes no longer possible. You are prudent and discreet. Ah! you advised me kindly; and kindness under such circumstances, must be rewarded. Take this purse——and remember, Amy, not a look nor a syllable to your mistress to-morrow to show that she is suspected! And now good night."

"Accept my thanks, my lord," said the lady's-maid, as she clutched the purse and her ear caught the chink of gold. "Good night."

She stole softly back to her own chamber; and a few minutes afterwards the Duke of Marchmont, in an equally stealthy manner, went down the private staircase, and rejoined Lettice,—who had found her way to the little room to which she was first introduced, and where a light had been left burning.

"Everything goes well," said Marchmont, with a look of triumph, as he poured her out another glass of champagne. "On Monday night you must repeat the performance. I will manage to run down to you between eight and nine o'clock, and tell you which particular dress you are to put on. And now farewell. I see that the business will be brought to a termination much more speedily than I had even dared hope or anticipate at first; and in a few days you will be enabled to return to London."

Lettice took her departure; and the Duke of Marchmont stole up to his own chamber, chuckling at the progress that was already made in the vile conspiracy against his innocent wife.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE POND.

According to the plan which he had in view, the Duke of Marchmont observed on the Monday evening what particular dress Lavinia wore; and he was inwardly delighted by the recollection that there was a duplicate thereof in the possession of Lettice at the farm-house. At about nine o'clock on this evening of which we are now writing, he rose from his chair in the drawing-room, where he was seated with the Duchess and the Hon. Wilson Stanhope; and complaining of a dreadful headache, said he should take a ramble through the grounds with the hope of dispelling it. But on issuing forth from the mansion, he made the best of his way to the farm-house—gave Lettice the requisite information with regard to the particular dress she was to put on—and then began to retrace his steps homeward.

The evening was very different from that of the Saturday when Lettice took her first trip on her nefarious mission to Oaklands. It was indeed just such an evening as that on which Christian had accompanied the Duke, to carry the box to the farm-house. It was dark and windy; and Marchmont drew his cloak more closely around him as he had to breast that gusty wind on his way back to the mansion. On nearing the pond, the surface of which gave forth a feeble shimmering light, he quickened his pace; but all in a moment he stopped short, and staggered as if about to fall, on beholding a dark form standing on the very

spot where he had seen his murdered uncle's corpse on that memorable morning when the foul deed was first discovered by Purvis and Leachley. Yes unmistakably that form was there!—beyond all possibility of doubt it stood upon that spot, motionless as if it were a statue! The Duke of Marchmont stopped short, we say—and then staggered back a pace or two. A faintness came over him—he passed his hand over his eyes—he looked again—the form was no longer there: but he fancied that he caught a last glimpse of it as it moved farther round the pond, where it either melted into thin air, or was else lost in the deep black shade of the hedge and of the huge trunks of the trees.

"It was nothing!—mere imagination!" said Marchmont to himself, now with an almost superhuman effort recovering his self-possession: but he nevertheless hurried along, throwing quick furtive looks over his shoulder: and he felt not so strong in the conviction *that it was really nothing* as he endeavoured to persuade himself that it was. Indeed, for a few minutes he was almost staggered in his guilty design with regard to his wife. But when once he entered upon the grounds of Oaklands, he felt more courageous—more strong in his purposes of evil. The influence of the occurrence at the pond had worn off: for his mind was naturally of an iron hardihood; and even if a veritable shape from the dead had confronted him face to face, and laid its cold hand upon him, he was not the man to be deterred from any object which he had taken so much trouble to accomplish. And he endeavoured to confirm himself in his treacherous intents by reflecting that if a divorce were procured in respect to Lavinia, he might in due time conduct another bride to the altar—issue might spring from such new alliance—and the proud title which he bore, would not either perish with him, or descend upon some claimant who might rise up from a lower grade of society. And then, too, he hated his wife: her modest virtues and unassuming excellences were in reality gall and wormwood to his evil-disposed heart. In short, he had many motives for ridding himself of her.

"Yes—it was all imagination," he said to himself; "and I was a fool for hesitating in my purpose even for a single moment!"—with which reflection he re-entered the mansion.

Lettice set off from the farm-house at about eleven o'clock; and though the night was so dark and tempestuous, she experienced no circumstance to renew the alarm which she had felt on the previous occasion. She reached the private door of the mansion at half-past eleven, and was admitted by the Duke in the same way as before. A glass of champagne was at hand to cheer and warm her: the cloak and the bonnet were put off—the veil was adjusted over her head—and she was conducted by Marchmont to Mr. Stanhope's chamber.

A few minutes afterwards the Duke tapped at the door of Amy Sutton's room; and the lady's-maid—who had been prepared for such a summons, if circumstances should arise to render it expedient—came forth at once, she not having begun to disapparel herself. Silently did she follow his Grace down the stairs; and he led her to the close vicinity of Mr. Stanhope's chamber. Concealing themselves in a place which appeared the most convenient for the purpose of watching, they remained motionless and silent for some while. At length the door of that chamber opened; and Lettice Rodney stole forth,—purposely lingering, and appearing to be listening attentively, just within the sphere of light which glimmered forth from the interior of the room. For inasmuch as no stars nor moon were shining on this particular night, it would have been impossible for Amy Sutton to distinguish the dress worn by Lettice, if this plan had not been adopted. Thus the door was left open; and for a few moments did Lettice linger near it, in pursuance of instructions previously given to her by the Duke. She passed on—Stanhope closed the door of his chamber—and at the expiration of a minute, the Duke said to Amy in a low deep whisper, "What think you now?"

"It is impossible, my lord, to disbelieve one's own eyes," answered the lady's-maid.

"Impossible indeed!" rejoined Marchmont. "Hasten you up to your own chamber—keep silence as heretofore—and here is a farther proof of my liberality."

Amy accepted the gold which was thrust into her hand; and she retraced her way to her room,—while Marchmont, at the expiration of a brief interval, descended to rejoin Lettice, who shortly afterwards issued forth from the private door of the mansion.

The darkness had deepened with the presence of midnight; and the wind had grown more tempestuous. Lettice Rodney drew her capacious mantle as closely around her as she could; and pressing on through the grounds, she entered upon the road. The moaning of the wind carried superstitious feelings into her soul. She felt that she had been assisting at a very criminal proceeding: for she comprehended full well that the ruin of an innocent lady was in contemplation. The effects of the champagne cheered her no longer: she was affrighted at the black turpitude wherein she was mixed up,—a turpitude as black as the darkness which surrounded her. It was the first time in her life she had ever experienced feelings so completely remorseful. She struggled against them—she endeavoured to cheer herself with the thought of the reward she had already received and of the farther proofs of Marchmont's liberality which she was yet to have: but these reflections failed now as a talisman to expel unpleasant thoughts from her imagination. She wished that she had not entered into this conspiracy. She was not so depraved that if it had been propounded to her all in a moment, she would have plunged headlong into it: but she had been gradually drawn in and enmeshed as it were in its trammels, till she had gone too far to retreat. The pitchy darkness of the night and the mournful moaning of the wind, filled her soul with images of terror.

How she wished that she had not to pass the pond! or that it was already passed! How glad she should be, she said to herself, when once more safe in her chamber at the farm-house! Marchmont had told her that she would not again have to visit Oaklands at night; and this was at least some consolation. But, Oh! how she wished that the remainder of the route was accomplished!

It was so dark that she could scarcely see her way; and thus her progress was slow—while ever

and anon the wind seemed to be speaking to her in human tones, as if reproaching her for the wickedness wherein she had played a part. And then, too, these sounds—at times when the wind sank somewhat—resembled the moans of murder borne upon the agitated air. Occasionally too she fancied that she heard footsteps approaching rapidly from behind; and she shuddered at the thought of being seized upon by lurking robbers—shuddered too more deeply still at the reflection that this same road might possibly become the scene of another hideous tragedy—herself the victim! And ever and anon through the deep darkness, shapes—darker than that darkness—appeared to flit; so that there were moments when she shrank within herself—when she trembled to the very confines of her being—while she felt as if awful horror would turn her brain. Lavinia, thou wast already avenged somewhat, in the frightful sensations which this guilty creature experienced!

And now she knew by the turning in the road, that she was drawing close towards the pond; and her limbs appeared to fail her. Her knees knocked together—her teeth chattered: wildly did she seek with straining eyes to penetrate the darkness, and assure herself that there was no unearthly shape standing on that scene of murder. Vividly back to her mind came the incidents of her first night's walk to Oaklands,—when twice she fancied she beheld a dark shape—once disappearing from the midst of the road, and the second time on the opposite side of the hedge. Not for an instant could she *now* persuade herself that those were mere fancies, as she had hitherto succeeded in doing:—they were in her brain with all the awful horror of realities. With a mighty effort she strove to gather up the remnants of her shattered, scattered courage; and she somewhat succeeded as she drew close to the pond. The feeblest possible glimmer rested upon its surface: shudderingly she looked that way to see if any shape of terror intervened to break this glimmering: but there was none. Her courage rose somewhat higher: the pond was passed—she began to breathe more freely,—when she became aware that she was not alone—that there was some one by her side. A scream rang wildly forth from her lips; and she dropped as if a bullet had at the instant penetrated her heart.

As Lettice Rodney slowly came back to consciousness, she thought that she was awaking from a hideous, horrible dream: but a sense of awful numbing consternation came slowly and chillingly over her as she gradually became aware of her position. She was by the side of the pond, half supported in the arms of some one; and water had been sprinkled upon her countenance.

"You have nothing to fear," said the individual, whose voice sounded low and deep to the ears of the appalled Lettice.

"Who are you?—for God's sake tell me who are you!" she cried, starting up in a species of frenzy.

"I am a human being, as you are," was the response; "although a guilty conscience may smite you with the dreadful thought that I come from another world."

"And what would you with me?" inquired Lettice, all her fears now suddenly flowing into another channel, and suggesting the horrible thought that she was in the hands of a robber and assassin.

"I tell you that you have nothing to fear in the form of violence," answered the individual,—who, we may as well observe, was none other than Clement Redcliffe: "but it is necessary that we should have some little conversation together."

"Conversation?" said Lettice, wildly echoing the word: but so bewildered and lost in terror was she as to be at the moment unconscious of what she was saying. "Conversation—*here?*"

"Yes—here!" replied Redcliffe: "for this is a spot where the guilty conscience becomes too deeply appalled not to make such atonement as may be in its power. Compose yourself. I need not apologize for constraining you to linger yet a little while in the bleak night-air,—you who hesitate not to face it in order to pursue your path of mischief!"

"What mean you?" asked Lettice, almost in a dying tone: for she at once comprehended that allusion was thus made to the nefarious transactions in which she had been engaged.

Her terror was however so far abated, that she no longer apprehended violence on the part of him who was thus addressing her; and she endeavoured, through the darkness, to obtain some idea of his features. Indeed, the suspicion had stolen into her mind that his voice was not altogether unfamiliar to her—at least in its accents—though its deep solemn tone was different enough from the hilarious one he had forced himself to assume on the occasion of his visit to Madame Angelique's abode. But the collar of his cloak was drawn so high up over his countenance, and his hat was pulled so much forward, that Lettice was totally unable to discern his features. She saw that he was tall, and upright as a dart as he then held himself: but these circumstances afforded no clue to the establishment of an identity.

"You ask what I mean?—and in a few words I will explain myself," said Mr. Redcliffe, still purposely disguising his voice as much as possible, so as to pass undiscovered through the interview. "It has come to my knowledge—it matters not how—that you are engaged in the vilest and most abominable pursuit that a human being could possibly enter upon, short of such a deed as that which has rendered this very spot so awfully memorable. But it is a pursuit which becomes doubly atrocious when adopted by a female against another of her own sex. I am no stranger to the outlines of this most execrable conspiracy. At this very moment you wear beneath that cloak a dress which is the counterpart of one belonging to the Duchess of Marchmont. On Saturday night you paid your first visit to Oaklands. I watched you—I dogged your footsteps—as I have done this night again——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Lettice, as Redcliffe's words explained to her the mystery of that shape which she had seen, and which now after all proved to be a reality—though a reality devoid of the preternatural associations which at one time had seemed to belong thereto. "For heaven's sake, sir, tell me who you are, and what you mean to do with me? Do not—do not give me up to justice!—do not ruin me! I have been led into it—I have been drawn on!"—and the wretched creature

clasped her hands together in wild, frenzied, shivering anguish.

"To that extent do I believe you," answered Redcliffe; "and if you do my bidding, you shall not be handed over to the grasp of justice."

"Oh, a thousand thanks for that assurance!" exclaimed Lettice, infinitely relieved. "But your bidding, sir—what is it?"

"Tell me truthfully, all that you have done within the walls of yon mansion," continued Redcliffe; "and beware how you attempt to deceive me. Indeed, the endeavour would be vain: for I know too much not to be enabled to discern in a moment whether the things you may relate correspond with and fit into the details wherewith I am already acquainted."

"Oh, believe me, sir, I will tell you truly!" exclaimed Lettice. "But you promise——"

"I am not a man who will fly from his pledge," interrupted Redcliffe. "And now proceed."

Lettice Rodney, more and more relieved by Redcliffe's assurances, at once made a full and complete confession of all that she had done, and the details of which are known to the reader. She concluded by an earnest entreaty that Redcliffe would save her as much as possible from exposure, and that he would also shield her against the anger of the Duke of Marchmont.

"I will do you no harm," he responded; "and as for the anger of the Duke of Marchmont, you surely can defy it. We will now walk away from this fearful spot. I am about to accompany you to the door of the farm-house where you are residing; and you will give me those dresses which were sent from London to serve the most diabolical of purposes. To-morrow, at an early hour, you would do well to leave the neighbourhood; and if the incidents of this night have produced any salutary effect upon your mind, I should counsel you to return not to that gilded den of infamy in London whence you came—but to study how to adopt a better course of life. There is one condition which I must impose; and this is that you mention not to the women at the farm-house what has occurred between yourself and me, and that you give them no explanation in respect to your motive for surrendering up the dresses. I need scarcely add that you are equally forbidden to communicate with the Duke of Marchmont; because you will not be so mad as to place yourself within the sphere of his vindictive rage."

While he was thus speaking, Clement Redcliffe conducted Lettice away from the vicinage of the pond; and they pursued the remainder of the short distance to the farm-house in silence. Having passed through the gate, Redcliffe broke that silence,—saying, "Have the goodness to make a parcel of the dresses in as compact a form as possible: I do not wish to take them in the box. I shall remain outside. Use despatch—bring them to me yourself—and see that you keep back not an article which originally came in that box. Beware how you deceive me!—for my pledge guaranteeing your impunity, holds good only so far as you execute my bidding honestly and truthfully."

Lettice promised to act as Mr. Redcliffe enjoined her: and he remained at the gate while she entered the house. In about a quarter of an hour she came forth again, with a bundle which she consigned to him. Again too did she endeavour to catch a glimpse of his countenance: but he was upon his guard in this respect: he did not choose to be recognised—and he felt confident that he was not. Still however floated through the mind of Lettice Rodney, the suspicion that the accents of his voice were not altogether unknown to her: but she could not for the life of her recollect where they had ever before sounded upon her ear.

"And now farewell," he said; "and may I hope that the incidents of to-night, together with the mercy which is shown you, will have the effect of leading you, Lettice Rodney, into other and better ways."

With these words, Clement Redcliffe hastened from the gate, and was immediately lost to the view of Lettice in the surrounding darkness. She re-entered the dwelling, half bewildered by all that had occurred, and even doubtful whether she were not in the midst of a dream.

The carrier's van which passed along the road on the following morning at nine o'clock, was stopped by Phœbe Norwood; and Lettice Rodney took her place therein, to be conveyed to the nearest town whence there was a coach for London. Whether she purposed to follow Mr. Redcliffe's advice and enter upon a new career—or whether she intended to return to Madame Augelique's—will transpire in a future chapter of this narrative.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE EXPLOSION.

At a still earlier hour than that on which the carrier's van was thus stopped, a note was delivered on that same morning at Oaklands, addressed to Christian Ashton; and the messenger who bore it—a labouring man—immediately departed without waiting to see if there were any response; in doing which he only followed out the instructions he had received, and for the faithful performance of which he had been liberally remunerated. The note was from Mr. Redcliffe, desiring Christian to come to him with the least possible delay.

It was a little after ten o'clock in the forenoon of the same day, that the Hon. Wilson Stanhope suddenly ordered his valet to pack up his boxes and follow with them as speedily as he could by the first conveyance which could be obtained; and having issued these commands, Mr. Stanhope quitted the mansion on foot. He appeared to be much agitated; and the valet knew that the orders were given immediately after his master had been closeted for a few minutes with the Duke of Marchmont. The domestics too, who were lounging in the hall, were struck by Mr. Stanhope's appearance as he rapidly passed out of the mansion, and as he flung a bank-note to the lacquey who was nearest, bidding him divide the amount amongst the servants generally. Thus, in a very few minutes, it became known through the house that there was something wrong—though the only one of the domestics who had an insight into the matter, was Amy Sutton. She of course comprehended that the crisis had come and that the storm was now on the point of bursting

above the head of her mistress. Of Lavinia's guilt she entertained not the slightest doubt:—how could she after all she had seen and heard? But still, with her habitual caution and cold reserve, she said nothing,—quietly awaiting the moment when she would be called upon to testify to all that had come to her knowledge, or until the tremendous truth (as she supposed it to be) should explode from another quarter.

At the time that the Hon. Wilson Stanhope was taking his departure in the manner just described, Lavinia was engaged in her own private sitting-room adjoining her bed-chamber. She was reading a book, and dreaming of no evil. All of a sudden the Duke entered the room; and she perceived in a moment that there was something wrong. He had tutored his looks to assume an air of ill-subdued rage; and walking straight up to her as she rose in affright from the sofa, he said, "Madam, you are faithless!"

"Good heavens, Hugh! what fearful misconception is this?" cried the startled Duchess, becoming pale as death.

"I repeat, madam," responded her husband sternly and vehemently, "you have violated your duties as a wife—you have dishonoured me!"

Now it was that the countenance of the Duchess became crimson with indignation—while her whole form trembled violently: and she exclaimed, "No, my lord! Never was accusation more foul—more false!"

"Every woman who is thus detected, speaks in a similar strain," retorted the Duke. "Here, madam, is one proof—and others have likewise come to my knowledge."

"Oh, this is going too far!" cried Lavinia, the tears gushing forth from her beautiful blue eyes, and her bosom heaving with convulsive violence.

"The proof, madam, I say!" thundered forth the Duke of Marchmont: and he produced a letter, which he hastily unfolded and displayed to her view.

"Whatever that letter may be, I know not," exclaimed the Duchess: and raising her clasped hands, she cried, "Heaven is my witness that I am innocent!"

"Innocent?" echoed Marchmont, forcing himself to look and to speak as if he were boiling with rage. "What! innocent in the face of such damning evidence as *this?* Besides, madam, your paramour has admitted his guilt. This letter, intended for your hands, but accidentally dropped by the villain who has dishonoured me——"

"Hugh," cried the Duchess, almost wild with mingled indignation, frenzy, and despair, "it is a horrible mistake—a frightful error! God is my witness that never by word or thought have I dishonoured you!"

"Ah! you dare persist in this impudent denial?" exclaimed the Duke. "Why, woman! here is the letter in which your paramour addresses you in the language of love—speaks of the favours you have bestowed upon him, and entreats their renewal!"

"Hugh, this is dreadful!" murmured the miserable Duchess, sinking upon the sofa, covering her face with her hands, and bursting forth into an agony of weeping.

"Oh, there are other proofs yet to come!" continued the Duke. "Since Saturday night has your frailty been known to me: but I have dissimulated—I have endeavoured to blind myself against my own convictions. Too merciful perhaps, and too confiding—or rather too slow to be convinced—I waited for other evidence—— And it is here—unmistakable, irrefutable, damning!"

As the Duke held forth the letter with one hand, he dashed the other against it while he thus spoke with every appearance of infuriate passion. Indeed, though having not the slightest legitimate ground, as the reader well knows, for the present proceeding, he had nevertheless literally lashed himself up into a rage. But he was for a moment somewhat staggered when the Duchess—suddenly becoming calm, and acquiring a degree of firmness at which even she herself was astonished—advanced up to him, and said, "I can look you in the face, Hugh, without blushing! This is a matter which cannot and must not be disposed of amidst a torrent of passion. I court and demand the completest investigation. There has been no circumstance in my life to justify so foul a calumny: there has never even been the faintest levity on my part to give colour to such an accusation.

"But this letter?" cried the Duke, holding it up before her.

"A letter might be found addressed to yourself," responded Lavinia, "and charging you with all conceivable iniquities: but it nevertheless would not prove your guilt."

"I tell you there are other proofs!" vociferated Marchmont: and he rang the bell violently.

The Duchess resumed her seat; and being now fortified with a calm dignity, as well as being upheld by the consciousness of her own innocence, she serenely awaited the next phase, whatsoever it might be, in this extraordinary drama. Not but that the whole proceeding was intensely painful for her:—still she felt certain that the issue must be in her favour, as she was very far from suspecting the dark villany plotted by her own husband.

As it was the bell of her Grace's private sitting-room which had been rung, it had to be answered by one of her female dependants; and it was Amy Sutton who in a few moments made her appearance. The first glance which the lady's-maid flung upon her mistress and the Duke, showed her that the explosion had taken place: but she was nevertheless somewhat amazed to perceive the comparatively calm and dignified look which Lavinia wore, and which bespoke outraged innocence far more than conscious guilt.

"Ah! it is you?" said the Duke, as Amy entered the room: "and it is fortunate—for you are the very person I at the moment wanted."

Now indeed the Duchess gave a half-start of surprise and curiosity; and then her regards settled upon Amy's countenance, to gather thence if possible what part she was about to play in the present proceedings. Pure-minded and kind-hearted as the Duchess herself was, she revolted against the idea which for an instant struck her that Amy could have been treacherously and wickedly calumniating her: but when she beheld a certain confusion almost amounting to distress in the young woman's look and manner, Lavinia was bewildered what to think.

"Amy Sutton," said the Duke, who now thought fit to speak in a more solemn and sub-

dued tone than he had hitherto adopted, "I am well aware that it is unpleasant, and indeed afflicting for you——"

"Amy," interrupted the Duchess, advancing towards her maid, and looking her fixedly in the face; "if you have an accusation to make against me, it requires no preface. Speak out! Do you know aught to my disparagement?—have you ever——"

"I would much rather not have been called upon," said the young woman, who notwithstanding her constitutional coldness and indifference, was really embarrassed, confused, and distressed, "to give utterance to a word——"

"Ah! then you do know what is going on!" exclaimed the Duchess. "But speak! What have you to say? Hesitate not—fear not—but speak, I command you!"

"Would it not be better," inquired Amy, turning her troubled looks from one to the other, "if your Grace were to throw yourself upon his lordship's mercy——"

"Amy, this is an insult!" cried Lavinia, with all the dignity but distress of outraged innocence. "There is some horrible misconception! Proclaim it at once, that I may speedily refute it!"

"Alas, madam," said the young woman, who was amazed at the confidence with which the Duchess spoke, but yet could not do otherwise than attribute it to a bold hardihood,—"appearances are indeed so much against your Grace——"

"And those appearances?" demanded Lavinia, with mingled imperiousness and vehemence: so that the usually mild, gentle, and soft-speaking Duchess appeared quite another being in the eyes of her dependant.

"Speak out, Amy!" cried the Duke.

"If I must," resumed the lady's-maid, "it is my painful duty to declare that I saw your Grace issue from the chamber of Mr. Stanhope——"

"What?" cried the Duchess, the burning blush of indignation and outraged modesty in a moment suffusing her countenance; and then her looks in the space of the next half-dozen seconds indicated all possible varieties and transitions of excited feeling—astonishment and distress, anger and bewilderment, uncertainty and terror. "You dare say *that*, Amy? *You* to be guilty of such dreadful wickedness! It is false!—false as ever the vilest falsehood in this world could be!"

"It is true!" thundered the Duke: "for I myself beheld you with mine own eyes, as Amy herself did!"

"I repeat," cried the miserable Duchess, now again completely overwhelmed by the astounding nature of the charge,—"I repeat, and I call heaven to witness that it is false!"

"It is true—too true!" vociferated the Duke, stamping his foot violently upon the carpet.

"It is false!" exclaimed another person, who at this moment threw open the door and appeared upon the scene.

It was Christian Ashton.

The guilty Duke of Marchmont was for an instant staggered by the presence of his secretary, and by the bold denial which had issued from his lips. He was seized with perplexity and bewilderment; but quickly recovering his self-possession, he cast a rapid mental glance over whatsoever circumstances he thought there might be that could have induced the young man to proclaim himself the champion of Lavinia's innocence. What was there but the affair of the box?—and how could Christian possibly know what that box had contained?

"Begone, sir!" cried the Duke, fire flashing from his eyes. "How dare you intrude upon our privacy?"

"Because I have a duty to perform," responded our young hero, as he advanced into the room: and Marchmont was now struck by the fact that he carried a large parcel tied up in brown paper.

The reader may conceive the increased amazement of Amy Sutton at the new turn which the matter appeared to be taking; and he may likewise imagine the mingled hope and suspense which Lavinia felt from the same cause. Christian's mien and bearing were quite different from what they were wont to be. The natural gentleness of his looks had altered into a decisiveness which was almost stern: the retiring nature of the mild and unobtrusive youth had given place to the manly firmness of one who had a special part to perform and who was resolved to accomplish it. The Duke grew more and more apprehensive: a thousand vague fears racked him: the basis upon which his whole iniquitous proceeding was founded, seemed to be crumbling away,—while he was still utterly at a loss to conceive from what particular point the disruption was arising.

"I repeat," said Christian, quailing not for a single instant in the presence of his ducal employer, "the words I ere now uttered—that the accusation against the Duchess is false——yes, false as the heart of him who invented it!"

"Oh, yes, it is false!" cried Lavinia: "heaven knows it is false! But accuse not my husband, Mr. Ashton!—he himself must have been cruelly deceived by circumstances!"

"I wish I was enabled to confirm your Grace's assurance," responded our young hero: "but it is not in my power to do so. My lord, everything is known, and shall be boldly proclaimed if you provoke such an exposure. Suffer me to whisper one word in your ear."

"This is too impudent!" ejaculated the Duke, goaded almost to frenzy, and not knowing how to act.

"Oh, Mr. Ashton, what have you said?" cried the Duchess, all the sources of her affliction becoming turned into a new channel. "It is impossible his Grace could have done this wilfully!—— Oh, no! you wrong him—you wrong him, I can assure you!"

"I see that it becomes necessary for me to speak out," said Christian, with the same firmness of look, tone, and manner as before. "My lord, Lettice Rodney has confessed everything: and here are proofs——"

"Enough!" exclaimed the Duke, bounding forward to seize upon the parcel whence our young hero had just torn off the wrapper.

"Good heavens!" cried the Duchess: "my own dresses!"

"Ah!" said Amy Sutton, astounded at what she also thus beheld.

"No," cried Christian, "they are not your Grace's dresses: but they are counterparts—duplicates—the use and purport of which his lordship can but too well explain."

Amy Sutton hurried from the room, forgetting to close the door behind her; and the Duke, clutching Christian by the arm, whispered to him in a hoarse voice, "Not another word, I conjure you!"—then he instantaneously added aloud, "There is something extraordinary in all this: but it shall be investigated. Of course I at once admit——"

"What your Grace cannot deny, and never ought to have impugned," interrupted Christian boldly: "her Grace's innocence!"

"For heaven's sake," said the Duchess, who had hastened to close the door—of which opportunity her husband had availed himself to whisper that urgent adjuration in Christian's ear,—"for heaven's sake let this dreadful transaction be calmly and dispassionately explained!"

"Yes!" cried Amy Sutton, who now burst back again into the room, with a degree of excitement she had never before in her life displayed: "your Grace's dresses are safe in your own toilet-chamber! But these—the very same! or at least the closest resemblance!"—and she hastily inspected the contents of the parcel which Christian had thrown upon the table.

"Now hear me," said the Duke of Marchmont, whose countenance was deadly pale, and whose entire manner indicated the profoundest trouble of soul, notwithstanding the almost preternatural efforts which he made to appear composed. "Solemnly in your presence, Christian Ashton—and in your's also, Amy Sutton—do I recognise and proclaim her Grace's innocence. Will this suffice? For a thousand reasons this affair must go no farther!"

"It is for her Grace to decide," said our hero.

The unfortunate Duchess could no longer blind her eyes to the fact that her own husband was at the bottom of a foul conspiracy of which she was to have been made the victim: but still she wished to spare him as much as possible; and she therefore unhesitatingly exclaimed, "Oh, no! let not the matter progress farther!"

"But I also must be consulted in this," said Amy Sutton, with that firmness which was characteristic of her. "I am dependent on my character for my bread," she continued, fixing her eyes upon the Duke; "and not for a moment must it be thought that I voluntarily or wilfully bore false evidence against her ladyship."

"I know enough of the circumstances," interposed Christian, "to be enabled to state that it is quite possible you have been grossly deceived, and that you fancied you beheld her Grace on particular occasions when it was in reality another. And now the uses to which these dresses have been put are perhaps fully understood——"

"Oh, enough! enough!" cried poor Lavinia, her looks recoiling from the haggard, ghastly, guilt-stricken countenance of her husband.

"Ah, I recollect!" suddenly exclaimed Amy, as a thought struck her. "That veil which was worn over the head of her whom your Grace pointed out!"—and she addressed herself to the Duke. "My lord, it was infamous of you!"

"For my sake, let no exposure take place!" murmured the Duchess, with appealing looks directed alike towards Amy and our hero. "I thank you, Mr. Ashton, for your kindness: your noble conduct never can be forgotten by me! And you, Amy—Oh, I do indeed acquit you of any evil intention! But I implore and beseech that nothing of all this shall be allowed to transpire. His Grace will treat me kindly in future——I forgive him!—from the bottom of my heart I forgive him!——Tell me, Hugh, that henceforth——"

And drawing her husband aside, she concluded in a whisper her hurried prayer that his behaviour would change towards her, and in the future compensate for the past.

"It will indeed be better that this should go no farther," said Christian, availing himself of the opportunity thus to speak aside to Amy Sutton. "It is for the sake of the Duchess that I recommend secrecy. You stand acquitted of all wilful complicity in the odious affair. If there be exposure, a separation becomes inevitable between the Duke and his wife; and under such circumstances it is always unfortunate woman who suffers most!"

"For my part," responded Amy, "I have no wish to bring about such exposure, now that my own character is cleared."

Scarcely had the young woman thus spoken, when Marchmont, accosting Christian, said in an abrupt manner, "Come with me."

"Yes—go with his Grace," exclaimed the Duchess: "but again accept my most heartfelt gratitude!"—and she proffered the youth her hand, which he respectfully took.

He then followed Marchmont from the room,—Amy Sutton remaining with her mistress. The Duke led the way to another apartment; and the moment they entered it, he said to Christian, "You will keep silence in respect to this transaction?"

"It was not even my intention to proclaim so much," answered our hero, "if your lordship had suffered me to breathe a few words in your ear, which would have convinced you that everything was discovered."

"And how was it discovered?" inquired the Duke quickly. "Did you go and seek Lettice Rodney? did Madame Angelique betray anything when you called upon her to fetch the box?"

"My lord, it is useless thus to question me," answered Christian: "I am resolved to give no explanations. Suffice it for your Grace to have received unmistakable evidence that everything is completely known to me. And now——"

"But you must tell me!" cried Marchmont vehemently. "I cannot remain in this state of doubt and uncertainty: I must know where the treachery has been!"

"Treachery, my lord!"—and Christian's tone expressed a withering sarcasm. "But I repeat, it is useless for your Grace to question me: I will explain nothing."

"One word?" said the bewildered Duke: "only one word, I beseech you? Was it Stanhope himself——"

"No, my lord. I will tell you this much—that the villain Mr. Stanhope went away in ignorance of all that was to take place. But beyond this I shall say nothing more. I am now about to take my departure; and I request from your Grace a certificate of good conduct."

But Marchmont heard not the youth's last words: he had begun to pace the apartment in an

agitated manner. The mystery which enveloped Christian's proceedings troubled his guilty mind. From what source could the exposure of the plot have possibly come first of all?—how was it that Lettice Rodney had been either persuaded or forced to surrender up the dresses? These were the questions which the Duke asked himself, and the solution of which he burnt to arrive at.

"My lord," said our hero, "under existing circumstances I cannot remain another hour in your Grace's employment. But inasmuch as I do not wish to stand the chance of your Grace subsequently speaking ill of me behind my back, I repeat my request for a certificate of good conduct."

"Ah! a certificate of good conduct?"—and for a moment Marchmont was inclined to treat the demand with scornful contempt: but a second thought restrained him; for he felt that his character was so completely at the mercy of the young man, he dared not convert him into an open and avowed enemy.

Biting his lip to keep down the feelings of rage and hate, and the threats of vengeance, which were seeking a vent, Marchmont placed himself at a table where there were writing-materials, and penned a few lines favourable to the character and qualifications of Christian Ashton. It cost him a painful effort indeed to complete the task, brief though it were; and when he had finished it, he could not help tossing the paper across the table with an ungraciousness that was almost brutal. But Christian—with a becoming dignity, which on the part of the obscure and humble youth contrasted strongly with the mean, petty, and ill-concealed spite of the great and powerful nobleman—took up the document, read it, deliberately folded it, and placed it in his pocket. Then, with a slight and distant bow, he was on the point of quitting the room,—when Marchmont exclaimed, "Ah! by the bye, there is a trifle of salary due to you for the short time you have been with me——"

But as he spoke in a supercilious tone which he could not possibly control, so strong were his infuriate feelings against the young man, the latter waited to hear no more—but left the apartment. Ascending to his chamber, he speedily packed up his trunk, and then hastened to take leave of the steward, whom he found in his own room.

"What! you are going Mr. Ashton?" said Purvis, seized with astonishment at the intelligence. "I hope nothing unpleasant has occurred?"

"You can judge for yourself, my good friend," responded Christian, "whether I am discharged through any misconduct of my own:"—and he displayed the certificate.

Purvis read it; and as he gave it back with a brightening look, he said, "Well, Mr. Ashton, though I am sorry you are going to leave us, yet on the other hand I am glad it is under no circumstances which may prejudice your future prospects. Farewell!—my best wishes attend you. I had hoped that we should have enjoyed many a pleasant ramble and chat together: but it seems otherwise destined. Farewell!"

The old man shook Christian's hand warmly again and again ere he suffered him to depart. Our young hero was issuing from the mansion, when he was accosted by Amy, who drew him aside and said, "Are you going to leave?"

"Yes—immediately," was the reply.

"Ah! her Grace thought that it would be so," resumed Amy. "But is it of your own accord?"

"Entirely," answered Christian. "After everything that has occurred, I could not possibly remain in the Duke's service. It is very different for you, inasmuch as you are attached to her Grace."

"The Duchess desired me to present you with this," said Amy, "hoping that you will not refuse to accept it as a token of her gratitude:"—and she placed a heavy purse in our hero's hand.

"Oh, no! no!" exclaimed Christian: "such a service as I was enabled to render her Grace, is sufficiently repaid by the grateful feeling it engenders, and is not to be remunerated by gold. Convey my sincerest thanks to her Grace; and God grant that she may be happy! Farewell, Amy."

Thus speaking, Christian hurried away from the mansion,—one of the inferior male domestics carrying his box for him as far as the porter's lodge, where he left it with the intimation that he would send some one in the course of the day to fetch it.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SCHOOLMASTER.

CHRISTIAN proceeded straight to the lonely cottage where Mr. Redcliffe had taken up his temporary quarters, and where he found that gentleman awaiting his return. He communicated everything that had occurred at Oaklands; and Redcliffe listened with the deepest attention.

"You have acted precisely in accordance with my instructions," observed Redcliffe, when Christian had brought his narrative to a conclusion, "and your own conduct in the matter deserves the utmost praise. You have lost your situation, and another must be procured for you. Cheerfully would I have you henceforth to live altogether with me, my young friend: but there are several reasons which compel me to deny myself that pleasure;—and in respect to them will I deal frankly with you. In the first place I could give you no employment; and idleness for a youth of your age, even with your excellent principles and with your naturally good disposition, would be very disadvantageous—I might almost say pernicious. Besides, you yourself, with such principles and with such a disposition, would I am sure infinitely prefer to eat the bread of your own honest industry than to subsist upon the resources of another. In the second place I myself, Christian, am no companion for one of your age: I am a lonely and unhappy man—my habits are peculiar—there are times when I smart under the sense of such wrongs——But I will not inflict aught of all this upon you. Suffice it to say that I have certain aims to work out, which do not altogether leave me the master of my own time nor of my own actions. And then too solitude is the necessary portion of such a one as I am; and I dare not have it broken by the com-

panionship of another. Therefore, my young friend, we must part again; and you must go forth into the world to pursue your own career. That certificate of character which you have obtained, together with your manners, your appearance, and your qualifications, will enable you speedily to procure another post similar to that which you have this day resigned. You will return to London without delay: I know that you are anxious to see your sister. Take a respectable lodging until you obtain fresh employment. Here are ample funds for your immediate wants. But do not think, Christian, that in thus parting from you, I cease to be your friend or your well-wisher. No—I shall ever be anxious concerning you. You must visit me occasionally; and whenever you need the assistance or the counsel of friendship, be sure to come to me. My purse shall always be open to you; for I am well aware that you will never abuse the license I thus give you. And fail not to acquaint me with the place of your abode at all times, so that if you come not to me as often as I could wish, I may know whither to send an invitation."

Mr. Redcliffe placed a purse containing fifty guineas in Christian's hand; and the old man of the cottage, who had been sent to the porter's lodge to fetch the trunk, having by this time returned, our hero took a grateful leave of Mr. Redcliffe, and departed. He proceeded to a neighbouring village,—the old man following with the trunk; and there he was presently taken up by a stage-coach proceeding to London. On arriving in the metropolis, Christian left his luggage at the coach-office and hastened away to see his sister. The meeting between the twins was of characteristic warmth and affection, although they had only been a week separated. Christian acquainted his sister with all that had occurred at Oaklands; and the pure artless mind of the young girl was shocked at the infamous conduct of the Duke of Marchmont. Her brother however enjoined her not to repeat a syllable of the tale to Lady Octavian Meredith; and after an agreeable hour or two spent together, he took his departure.

It was now late in the evening; and Christian determined to pass the night at an hotel and look out the next morning for a lodging,—his purpose being to reside in such temporary quarters until he could obtain another situation through the medium of advertisements inserted in the daily newspapers. Accordingly, after breakfast in the morning, our young hero issued forth; and after wandering some little while amongst the streets at the West End, he presently found himself threading that one in which dwelt Mr. Chubb the parish clerk. Was it accident that brought Christian thither? or was it a scarcely comprehended and unacknowledged feeling of interest and of love on behalf of the young creature of ravishing beauty whom ten days back he had seen for a few minutes at that house? The reader's imagination can so easily solve the query which we have put, that it becomes unnecessary for us to explain it in set and formal terms. But on passing the house, and casting a look up at the windows, how sudden a thrill galvanised our hero when he perceived a card announcing apartments to let!

Christian stopped short, and looked at the card again. Yes—there were the words, in a bold round schoolmaster's hand, embellished with all manner of flourishes and caligraphic illustrations. Christian was more than half inclined to knock at the door: but a sudden sensation of timidity restrained him—and he passed slowly along the street. But he did not leave the street: no—he turned, retraced his way towards the house, looked at the card again, and was again about to knock at the door, when the thought struck him that the apartments might be if not exactly above his means, at least above the sum which he was justified in paying for a lodging; and that therefore if he did make an inquiry and then decline, it might be set down to impertinent curiosity or else as an excuse to obtain a glimpse of the lovely Miss Vincent. This latter reflection, as it swept through Christian's mind, sent all the blood up into his countenance: for he felt as bashful as the very young girl whose image was uppermost in his thoughts. So again he passed on—but this time to the other extremity of the street: and yet he could not tear himself away from it.

"After all," he thought, "there is no harm in making the inquiry:"—and he retraced his way.

At the same moment that his vision was once more turned upon the card in the ground-floor window, it encountered the vixenish eyes of Mrs. Chubb who was looking over it. He bowed: she did not seem to recognise him, nor to comprehend whether the salutation were really meant for herself or not. But now, with a sudden access of intrepidity, Christian ascended the steps and knocked boldly at the front door. Mrs. Chubb's vixenish face disappeared from the window; and her lean gawky form instantaneously appeared at the door. She was dressed in a faded and dirty cotton gown, with an old shawl thrown over her shoulders, and a rusty black crape cap with dingy and crumpled red ribands upon her head. For a moment she surveyed our hero with the air of one who strives to bring forth a reminiscence from dimness and obscurity; and then suddenly recollecting him, she said with a very sour look, "Oh! you are the young gentleman who brought my husband home t'other night when he was the wuss for liquor? I suppose you've come to call upon him: but he's engaged in school."

"No," responded Christian; "I took the liberty of knocking at your door in consequence of seeing that card in the window."

"Ah! that's different," said Mrs. Chubb: and her looks suddenly became different also. "If you're in want of decent and respectable lodgings, sir, you can have 'em here—leastways if we suit each other. It's on'y a small parlour and bedroom—which is fifteen shillings a week with attendance."

Christian had fifty pounds in his pocket; and he thought to himself that in a week, or a fortnight at the outside, he might obtain another situation—so that it would not be unreasonable on his part to take Mrs. Chubb's lodging. He walked in, and she showed him the parlour of which she had spoken, and which was indeed small enough, it being a third room on the ground-floor,—the one little window of which looked into the yard, commanding a view of the water-butt and the dust-hole, a pail and a mop, together with two specimens of animated nature—one being in the shape f a cat that was sitting blinking on the wall, and

the other in the form of a slatternly servant-girl who was peeling potatoes and whose wages might at the first guess be put down at eighteenpence a week. The bed-chamber was above this little parlour, and of corresponding size. The rooms were however cleanly enough; and Christian speedily intimated his desire to become their occupant. He took out his purse to pay the rent in advance: but Mrs. Chubb, who was a woman that expressed her thoughts without the slightest circumlocution or disguise, declared "that she never took nobody without a reference; for though a lodger might be able to pay money, it was not always a proof of respectability."

Thereupon our hero immediately mentioned the name of Mrs. Macaulay,—upon hearing which Mrs. Chubb was reminded that Christian was a guest at that lady's house on the momorable night when he conducted her husband home; and this was a sufficient guarantee that he must be well known to Mrs. Macaulay aforesaid.

"Well," she observed, "the reference will do, sir: indeed there is no call whatsumever to take it. You can pay the week in advance; and if you come this way, Mr. Chubb will give you a receipt."

Christian accordingly followed Mrs. Chubb across the yard; and she opened the door of the schoolroom,—the boys' entrance to which was in the next street. It was a small, ill-ventilated place—excessively dirty—and the atmosphere so close and unpleasantly hot that Christian stopped short on the threshold. There a most edifying sight burst upon his view. At a desk sat Mr. Chubb, in an old dressing-gown, the pattern of which, before it was faded and soiled, had been a blue ground with black stripes: his feet were thrust into slippers, down at the heels; and as he was in the middle of hearing a class, he held a swingeing cane in his right hand. Suspended to a nail in the wall against which he sat, a huge birch had a most ominous appearance,—enough to provoke a tingling sensation on the part of the urchins who contemplated it. There might be altogether about forty scholars packed in this stifling place, and averaging from five to ten years of age.

When the door opened, Mr. Chubb looked slowly and solemnly towards it: for he always maintained a very grave and dignified bearing in the presence of his scholars—never giving way to any excitement except when he used the cane or applied the birch; and these he inflicted in the manner in which rowers are sometimes urged by the steersmen to "give way"—namely, "with a will." Mr. Chubb therefore, preserving his wonted solemnity, merely bestowed a bow upon Christian, and went on hearing the class. Mrs. Chubb did not immediately interrupt him: for she was doubtless anxious to impress our young hero with the wonderful discipline which prevailed in the school, the admirable educational qualifications possessed by her husband, and the marvellous brilliancy of the intellects which were expanding under such luminous tuition.

"It's the third class he's a-hearin' of," whispered Mrs. Chubb to Christian; "and they're all little 'uns, you see."

Christian looked as if he thought the sight a very interesting one. Perhaps there was the dimly floating idea in his mind of conciliating Mrs. Chubb, so as to be invited into her own parlour, where he might expect to see the beautiful Miss Vincent.

"Now then, Bill Shadbolt," said Mr. Chubb, "how do you spell pig?"

"P—i—double g, please sir," was the response.

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb. "Now, how do you describe it?"

"A hanimal, please sir."

"Very good. Next boy, Ben Tidleywink—what's a pig—biped or quadrooped?"

"Biped, please sir."

"No, he ain't," said Mr. Chubb, with an awful frown and a sterner clutching of the cane, which perhaps he would have used but for Christian's presence. "Guess again."

"Oh! quadrooped, sir."

"To be sure. Very good, boy. Quadrooped, 'cause why he walks on four legs and has got a tail. Cut off his tail and he loses his dignity. It's just the same as taking a cocked hat and laced cloak away from a beadle; he sinks down into the commonest humanity. Now then third boy, George Snuffkin. What have you got to tell me about a pig?"

"Hamphiberous, please sir."

"Very good. And why is he amphiberous?"

"'Cause why, sir, he lives on solids and fluids."

"To be sure—meal and water makes his wash. But what else is he?"

"Graminivorous, please sir," was George Snuffkin's intelligent answer.

"And so he is. But explain."

"'Cause why, sir, he don't mind having green stuff and vegetables in his wash."

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb. "Now take a lesson, boys, from the pig, and tutor your appetites to eat whatsomever comes in your way. That's the example I like to set the young idear when I teach it how to shoot."

Christian thought, as he recollected Mrs. Macaulay's party, that Mr. Chubb might have added without the slightest exaggeration that he could drink likewise anything that came in his way: but of course he gave not verbal utterance to the reflection.

"Now then, Joe Brinksby," continued Mr. Chubb, "how do you spell cat?"

"C—a—double t, please sir," was the boy's response.

"Of what genius is the cat?" inquired Mr. Chubb.

"The mouser genius, please sir."

"Very good. And what is there pecooliar about that beautiful domestic animal?"

"They can see in the dark, sir—'cause why they are full of electricity, which runs up from the tip of the tail to the head and comes out at the eyes."

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb, complacently. "Third class may staud down."

And as the boys went back to their seats, the schoolmaster rose from his own; and gravely shaking hands with Christian, said, "So you have come to give me a call and have a look at the school? You see, Mr. Ashton, I teach these young members of the rising generation nat'ral history along with their spellin'. It kills two birds with one stone, and gives 'em a power of concentrating their idears. It's a good system,

and is making its way as fast as steam-ingins and electric tilligrafs."

"I dare say Mr. Ashton is very glad to have an opportunity of seeing the school," said Mrs. Chubb: "but he didn't come for that all the same. He's took our lodgings: so you'll just write him out a receipt for the fust week, which he has paid in adwance."

"Amen!" said Mr. Chubb: and reseating himself at the desk, he nibbed a pen—held it up to the light to assure himself that it was properly mended—and in a true schoolmaster fashion wrote the receipt in round hand, covering all the spare part of the slip of paper with the most extraordinary flourishes, and winding up the achievement with some curious illustration under his own name, —which said illustration might either be taken for the feather end of a quill, or else as an ingenious representation of that very cat's tail along which the electricity had been described as passing. Having leant back in his seat for a few moments, to admire the general effect of the receipt, Mr. Chubb gravely dried it on his blotting-paper, and handed it to Christian.

"That's the way," he said, pointing with his pen to the writing, "that I teach the boys to make their up-strokes and their down-strokes. But you shall see:"—then raising his voice, he exclaimed, "Now then, first class, with your copy-books!"

This command was followed by a bustling about on the part of some dozen of the scholars; and then ensued a rush of the same interesting youths in corduroys and pinafores, up to the desk. Mr. Chubb examined the copy-books one after another, passing them as he did so to Christian, and looking very hard in his face to observe the effect produced by these elegant specimens of juvenile caligraphy. Of course Christian admired everything thus submitted to him, and expressed himself so well pleased with Mr. Chubb's scholars that he begged to be allowed to place five shillings in the schoolmaster's hands, to be expended on whatsoever refreshments the juveniles might fancy and which the nearest pastrycook could supply. It must be again confessed that there was a little artifice in all this—though venial and natural enough: for, as we have before said, the youth was desirous to obtain Mrs. Chubb's good opinion, in the hope that it would facilitate the realization of his desire to see Miss Vincent. Nor was he disappointed: for Mrs. Chubb requested the pleasure of his company to tea in the evening.

He was speedily installed in his lodgings; and having drawn up an advertisement for the situation of private secretary to a nobleman, member of parliament, or any other person requiring such a functionary, he sallied forth to take it to the office of the *Times*. Returning home again, he dined; and with some books whiled away the hours until six in the evening,—when, having studied his toilet with an unusual degree of nicety, he repaired to Mrs. Chubb's parlour. As Christian opened the door, he could scarcely conceal the joy which thrilled through him, on beholding the lovely creature who had inspired him with so deep an interest.

Isabella Vincent was, as we have previously said, sixteen years of age; and it was no wonder that her exquisite beauty should have made an impression upon the heart of Christian Ashton. She was tall and slender, with a sylphid symmetry of shape that was at once gracile and elegant: for her's was that sweet age, when, with perhaps a slight precocity, the delicate outlines of girlhood's form were softly rounding and gently developing into the more flowing ones of approaching womanhood. All these outlines indicated a justness of proportions which, while constituting her form the rarest model of expanding beauty, seemed to fulfil the idea which the sculptors of old sought to express and work out in their Parian effigies. Its willowy elasticity and youthful grace—its slenderness of waist and softly budding contours of bust—its sloping shoulders and gently arching neck—its rounded arms and its straightness of limbs—its exquisitely modelled hands and sculptured perfection of ankles and of feet,—all combined to render Isabella's form the very incarnation of those rules of art which swayed the chisel or the pencil of the greatest masters when seeking to pourtray woman, in her loveliest form, through the medium of the marble or of the canvass.

As for her countenance,—to gaze thereon, it was not so much the perfect oval of that sweet face—nor the faultless regularity of the features—nor the deep blue eyes, so large and clear, with their thickly fringed lids—nor the classically pencilled brows, set upon the opals of the stainless forehead —nor the well-cut lips of coral redness—nor the teeth of orient pearls which shone between—nor the transparency of the complexion, with the softest tint of the rose upon the cheeks—nor the rich abundance of glossy dark brown hair, showering in ringlets upon her shoulders,—it was not all this assemblage of charms which would most ravish and enchant the mind of the observer. But there was something in the sweet pensiveness and the holy melancholy, so to speak, of Isabella's countenance which constituted the pure virginal charm that appealed to the sentiment and not to the sense, and which had to do with the soul as much as with the heart of the beholder,—a charm which no eye could fail to perceive, the influence of which no mind could help acknowledging, and yet which only the imagination could comprehend inasmuch as no pen can describe it. Indeed, it was what the perfume is to the rose,—an essence apart from the beauty which attracts the eye: it was what the halo is to the angel,—a light distinct from the heavenly beauty of the form itself. It was the inexpressible charm which makes one think, while gazing on such a face, that the soul itself is unveiling its own loveliness and looking out in a soft sweet pensiveness.

Christian Ashton—with his refined intelligence, and with his feelings of unwarped delicacy—was the very one to appreciate the beauty of such a being as Isabella Vincent. To mere physical charms he would perhaps have remained long insensible: but here was mental and moral beauty—the beauty of the soul—mingling with loveliness of form and features in a manner which he had never seen before, save in respect to his own sweet sister Christina. The love with which Isabella had already inspired him—though heaven knows how unconsciously on *her* part and how as yet incompletely comprehended on *his own*—was not the mere every-day passion to which the name is so erroneously applied, or which of its own accord usurps the denomination: but it was that love

which has something so œsthetic in its nature—so ethereal in its essence—so sublimated in its contexture, that it can be explained in no terms falling short of those which would depict it as the lost elysium of the soul—the veritable paradise of feeling whose sense died out of the hearts of our first parents at the same time that the spell of their immortality was broken.

Christian could not understand the footing on which Miss Vincent was dwelling beneath the Chubbs' roof. She was treated with more or less respect, especially by Mr. Chubb, who invariably called her "Miss" when he spoke to her: and it was only when Mrs. Chubb was in an ill-humour about anything, that she addressed herself in rather irritable terms to the young lady—as indeed she was wont to do towards any one else who came in her way. Christian did not therefore think that Isabella was living there in the light of a dependant: the only conjecture he could form, was that she paid for her board and lodging, though not to an amount which rendered the Chubbs so extremely anxious to keep her that their civility became downright servile. In her manner she was diffident and retiring, but not actually reserved—much less awkward or embarrassed: she spoke but little—yet when she did speak, it was with a mild and ladylike affability. Her voice was singularly sweet and melodious, with a tinge of plaintiveness in its tones: her language was well chosen—her remarks were characterized by intelligence. That she had been well educated, was evident,—as likewise that she was well-bred and well brought up; and all the usages of good society were familiar to her. How came she, then, in her present position?—had she no relatives to take charge of her—no friends of a better order than those in whose care Christian found her? All these were mysteries which he could not penetrate, and concerning which he dared scarcely ask on the next occasion that he found himself alone with either Mr. or Mrs. Chubb.

Four or five days passed; and Christian occasionally met the beautiful Isabella upon the stairs. She always responded to his passing remarks with that mild affability which we have just noticed: but he found no opportunity to lead her into a protracted conversation. She never stirred out of the house except when accompanied by Mrs. Chubb:—for the greater part of the day she kept her own chamber: sometimes she sat in the front parlour down stairs—and was then for the most part occupied in reading or working. Christian felt assured that she was not happy, though she might endeavour to resign herself to her lot. He was also convinced that there must be some strange mystery with regard to this beautiful creature; and he longed to fathom it,—not through any impertinent curiosity, but because he had become so deeply interested in her—so profoundly enamoured of her! She was a lovely myth; and often and often did Christian catch himself sighing: occasionally too did a tear trickle down his cheeks as he said to himself, "She is not happy; and it is not given to me to insure her felicity. Oh, to obtain her confidence, and to be permitted to breathe the language of solace and sympathy in her ears!"

The week was passing away; and Christian had received no answer to his advertisement. He endeavoured to make himself believe that he was sorry for this delay in obtaining another situation: but it was not so easy to arrive with conscientiousness at that belief. Indeed, if the truth be told, we think it must be admitted that Christian was rather glad than otherwise at having an excuse for prolonging his residence beneath the same roof which sheltered the object of his growing love. When he saw his sister he spoke to her about Isabella Vincent; and he asked Christina if she would come and call upon the young lady, provided the latter would consent to receive the visit? Christina, as the reader is aware, was always ready to do anything that lay in her power to serve her brother or to please him; and she cheerfully responded in the affirmative.

"Now," thought Christian to himself, "there will be an opportunity of cultivating a better acquaintance with the charming but mysterious Isabella!"

Accordingly, in the afternoon of that very same day on which he had thus spoken to his sister, our young hero proceeded to the Chubbs' parlour at a moment when he knew that Miss Vincent was there alone. He knocked at the door: her sweet voice bade him enter; and it struck him that the soft tint of the rose deepened slightly upon her cheeks when her eyes encountered his own. The usual compliments were exchanged; and then Christian, mustering up all his courage, said to the young lady, "I hope you will not think I am taking a very great liberty——but—but—I have spoken of you to my sister, who lives with Lady Octavian Meredith——Christina is a sweet amiable girl—and if you will grant your assent, it will afford me the utmost pleasure to introduce her to you."

The transitions of Isabella's beautiful countenance expressed a variety of feelings as our hero thus addressed her; and it was the fear of either giving offence, or of proposing something which was unwelcome, that made him hesitate as he had done. For an instant there was gratitude depicted in Isabella's look: then it changed into mournfulness: then she flung a quick glance towards the door, as if fearful that this conversation might be overheard: then she turned her eyes again on Christian with a saddening gaze; and then she bent them downward—and he thought that the faintest, gentlest sound of a subdued sigh was wafted to his ears.

"Christina," he said, hesitatingly and tremulously, "would be rejoiced to visit you and to form your acquaintance."

"I take it as very kindly meant, Mr. Ashton," answered Isabella, whose accents were likewise tremulous, notwithstanding her visible endeavours to speak firmly and to hide whatsoever emotions were struggling in her bosom. "Indeed, I feel grateful——but—but"——and here she again glanced towards the door—"I am not allowed to receive any visits, nor to form any friendships."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Christian, astonished and indignant: "are you the victim of a tyranny so stern as this?"

"Hush! for heaven's sake, hush!" said Isabella, glancing with renewed apprehension towards the door: and then, as if no longer able to restrain the emotions which were agitating within, she burst into tears.

"Good God, that I should have made you weep!" cried Christian: and in the excitement, the confusion, and the hurry of his own thoughts and feelings, he seized her small fair hand.

It was however instantaneously withdrawn—but not in anger; for the beauteous Isabella flung upon him, through the dimness of her tears, a look which eloquently proclaimed that she comprehended all his generous sympathy and was grateful for it. Then hastily wiping away those tears, she hurried from the room. At the same moment there was a double knock at the door; and Christian retraced his way to his own room.

He was in the midst of painful and bewildering conjectures as to the nature of that mystery which enveloped the lovely Isabella, and which seemed to be associated with so much cruel coercion and unnatural tyranny,—when the trull of a servant-girl knocked at his door, and throwing it open, said, "Here's a genelman which wants you, Mr. Ashton: and this is his card."

Our hero took the card, and found that it represented the aristocratic though perhaps not very euphonious name of the Chevalier Gumbinnen. The owner of this name had been left standing in the passage by the maid-of-all-work; and Christian, on hurrying forth, was horrified to perceive a mop on his visitor's right hand, and a pail of dirty water under his very nose. He flung a hasty reproach at the girl, and began confounding himself in excuses to the Chevalier,—who received them all with a sedate silence and a sort of inane mystification of look—which indeed was by no means astonishing, when it comes to be considered that the Chevalier Gumbinnen understood not a syllable of English. Christian hastily led the way into his own sitting-room—handed the Chevalier a chair—and awaited explanations, although he had no doubt in his own mind that the visit bore reference to the advertisement in the newspaper.

The Chevalier Gumbinnen was a little man, with a somewhat dirty look. He had very red hair, huge moustaches, and small eyes of pinkish blue. There certainly was nothing aristocratic in his appearance, whatever there might be in his name: neither was there any particular freshness in his costume. On the contrary, it seemed a little the worse for wear. It consisted of a blue dress coat with a stand-up collar: it was cut round in front, and thus sloped away into the tails: it had a great deal of black braiding about it, and was worn unbuttoned. The waistcoat was white—or rather had been a week back when it first came home from the wash: but it was evident that this article, as well as the Chevalier's shirt, had not been put on clean in the morning of that particular day. His pantaloons were black, with long stripes of braiding: his hat was of singular shape, and somewhat deficient in nap. He wore a profusion of jewellery, which looked very well at the first glance, but perhaps would not have borne the close inspection of a *connoiseur* in such articles. Indeed, we are very much afraid that if the Chevalier Gumbinnen had sought to raise a loan upon all the personal property which was included under this particular head, the pawnbroker would have pronounced the diamonds to be paste, and would have found that the gold chains passed not readily though the ordeal of the testing acid. In a word, this foreign gentleman's appearance was sufficient to mystify Christian considerably as to who or what he could possibly be.

Without speaking a word, the Chevalier Gumbinnen drew forth a somewhat soiled pocket-book: and producing thence a dirty scrap of paper, displayed it before Christian's eyes,—at the same time fixing upon him a look of knowingness rather than of well-bred inquiry. It was our hero's own advertisement, cut out of the *Times;* he therefore hastened to declare that it was so, and that he was the C. A. therein specified. Still the Chevalier maintained a profound silence: so that Christian was at a loss whether to conclude that his visitor was altogether dumb, or that he was merely unable to comprehend the English language. Again however was the Chevalier's hand plunged into the pocket-book; and now he drew forth a larger card than his own, and which he presented to our hero. It was not the cleanest in the world: but nevertheless, whatsoever it had on it was perfectly visible. On the upper part there was a sovereign crown; and under it there was the name of the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. The address in the right hand corner was *Mivart's Hotel.*

Here was grandeur! It was evidently a reigning Duke who was sending for Christian; and doubtless the Chevalier Gumbinnen was some high dignitary attached to the person of his Royal Highness. Such was the conclusion to which our hero naturally came. He looked at the Chevalier; and the Chevalier looked at him. Did the Chevalier mean to speak?—or, indeed, could he speak at all? Christian could not help thinking it was rather a strange proceeding to send this silent gentleman on such a business; and he began to feel somewhat awkward. The Chevalier however condescended presently to relieve him from his embarrassment: for, taking out a somewhat cumbrous watch—which would doubtless have been considered handsome in the time when pinchbecks were in fashion—he displayed the dial before Christian's eyes; and pointing to the hour of *four*, gave a sort of significant grunt, and then stared for half a minute in the youth's countenance, to assure himself that the intimation was comprehended. Christian bowed: the Chevalier made a very slight and condescendingly dignified inclination of the head—put on his napless hat—and took his departure.

The whole proceeding was singular enough: but Christian understood that he was to call at Mivart's Hotel to see his Royal Highness, the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, at four o'clock. It was now a little past three; and therefore our hero had only just time to dress himself in his best apparel and set off to Brook Street, Grosvenor Square. While proceeding thither, his thoughts were divided between Isabella Vincent and the business on which he was now bent. He of course imagined that the Duke required an English secretary; and hence the application to himself, made through that very interesting, intelligent, and enlightening person the Chevalier Gumbinnen. Christian could have wished to remain a week or two longer at Mrs. Chubb's ere entering upon another situation: but he had his bread to get, and must not throw away a chance. Besides, it suddenly occurred to him that

as the Duke was residing at an hotel, and was not likely to remain very long absent from his own dominions, it was perhaps only a temporary occupation about to be offered him, and one which would still enable him to occupy his lodgings beneath the same roof with the lovely Isabella.

While making these reflections, Christian arrived at Mivart's Hotel,—at the door of which a waiter was lounging with a white napkin in his hand, looking up the street as if in contemplation of some beautiful prospect, although there was in reality nothing to be seen except what must have been familiar enough to the man's view. But no one ever did observe an hotel waiter standing at the street-door, who was not thus staring fixedly in one particular direction.

"I have been directed," said Christian to the waiter, "to attend at this hour upon the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

"Very good, sir," was the man's response, as he slowly desisted from gazing up the street. "Please to follow me, and I will take you to Baron Raggidbak."

Christian for a moment thought that the waiter was putting off upon him an insolent jest: but as the man spoke with an air of perfect seriousness, and at the same time began to lead the way up the staircase, our hero followed, though still marvelling at the extraordinary title of the nobleman to whom he was about to be presented. They ascended to the first landing,—where the waiter, opening a door, ushered Christian into a sort of ante-chamber, in which a tall, thin, hungry-looking man—moustached and bearded—dressed very much in the style of the Chevalier Gumbinnen, and whose appearance combined an equal amount of tawdriness and shabbiness—was lounging in an arm-chair by the fire, reading a German newspaper, very dirty and very much crumpled.

"This is Baron Raggidbak, his Royal Highness's Groom of the Stole," said the waiter in an undertone to Christian: and then the man withdrew.

Our hero advanced with a respectful salutation towards the high functionary who was seated by the fire; and the high functionary, laying down the newspaper, surveyed Christian in a sort of supercilious manner, as if determined to see what he was made of ere introducing him to his ducal master. At length he condescended to speak; and in so doing, displayed at least one advantage over the Chevalier Gumbinnen.

"You sall be de yong mans what de Lord Chamberlain did come for to go after dis afternoon?" was the question which Baron Raggidbak put to Christian.

Our hero bowed, and said, "Yes, my lord."

"Vare goot!" said the Baron, complacently caressing his bearded chin, and now looking far more favourably upon our hero, as if that respectful appellation of "my lord" had considerably sweetened the temper of the Groom of the Stole. "You vare quick wid de pen? you vare clever wid de writin' and de spelliu' in de Inglis langvidge—eh?"

"I have a testimonial to exhibit, my lord," answered Christian, "which I think will be satisfactory."

"Vare goot!" said the Baron, still caressing his chin with one hand, and playing with a copper-gilt watch chain with the other: "den you sall succeed wit his Royal Highness! Ah! dis is de Chevalier Kadger! De Chevalier is de—how you call him?——de querry to his Royal Highness; and de Chevalier sall go for to introduce you."

The Chevalier Kadger, who entered the anteroom at the moment, wore a sort of military uniform, of dark green cloth, tolerably threadbare, with tarnished gold lace, and red stripes down the pantaloons. He was a heavy, sleepy, vulgar-looking man, with dark wiry hair brushed straight off from his forehead, and a very fierce moustache. He said something in German to the Baron Raggidbak, at which they both chuckled in what Christian fancied to be a somewhat vulgar manner. The Chevalier Kadger then planted himself close in front of our hero, contemplating him slowly from head to foot. Christian underwent this inspection with exemplary patience, inasmuch as he thought it one of the necessary preliminaries to the successful attainment of his object. But as he stood with his eyes modestly bent down, he became aware of a certain disagreeable odour floating around him, and which seemed to be compounded of stale tobacco-smoke, garlic, and rum. At first he fancied he must certainly be mistaken, as such an ignoble effluence could scarcely have its source in the person of so distinguished a character as the Chevalier Kadger, Equerry-in-waiting to a reigning Duke. But when there was no longer a possibility of resisting his own convictions, and when his olfactory organs proved beyond all mistake that it was veritably and truly the Chevalier's person which was thus redolent of garlic, rum, and bad cigars (the last-mentioned being evidently full-flavoured Cubas) Christian was certainly astonished. However, he was now on the point of being conducted into the presence of the Duke; and he thought to himself that he should find in this distinguished Prince a very great contrast with the appearance of those personages of his suite whom he had as yet seen.

The Chevalier Kadger preceded Christian with his person, and likewise with the ordour that hung about him. He paused for a moment in an adjacent room to speak to a dirty, seedy-looking, unkempt man, who was taking out plate from a box, and who, as our hero subsequently learnt, was Baron Farthenless, the Privy Purse. They passed on to another room, where Christian beheld a tall personage—somewhat stout, under forty years of age, coarse-featured, and vulgar-looking—dressed in some strange sort of military uniform, with a star upon his breast. The uniform had evidently seen good service; and if it had pertained to an English nobleman, would long since have found its way into the hands of his valet, and thence to some old clothes' shop in Holywell Street. As for the star, it was certainly an ingenious combination of pieces of different-coloured glass set in plated metal,—looking very much like a "theatrical property;" and its value might have been about three and sixpence. This personage was lounging near a window, in conversation with the Chevalier Gumbinnen and three or four other worthies, whose appearance was of corresponding seediness and tawdriness. The effect produced by this group was perhaps more novel than satisfactory; and Christian thought to himself that if this were the Duke, he was a strange-looking man for a reigning

sovereign, and had a strange-looking retinue. But there was certainly one thing in his favour—that he evidently strove not to throw his adherents into the shade by any super-excellence on the score of his own outfit.

The Chevalier Kadger beckoned Christian to advance; and the Chevalier Gumbinnen, acting the part of Lord Chamberlain and Master of the Ceremonies, presented the youth to the high and mighty Duke of Saxe-Stolburg-Quotha: but though the Chevalier spoke in German, it was nevertheless a sort of satisfaction to our hero's mind to discover that he had the faculty of speech at all. The youth bowed low to his Royal Highness, who motioned him to draw still nearer—and then began to converse with him in tolerably good English.

"It is my purpose to remain about a month in this country," said the Duke; "for which period I require the services of a young gentleman to write letters in English for me to those noble and illustrious personages with whom I may have to correspond. Does such a position suit you?"

Christian answered in the affirmative; and the Duke continued speaking.

"I shall require your attendance every morning at ten o'clock; and you may consider the hours of occupation to be until five: because, in addition to the management of my English correspondence, you will have to make notes of certain statistical details which I am anxious to obtain, and the sources of which will be duly furnished to you. Have you testimonials?"

Christian produced the one which he had obtained from the Duke of Marchmont; and this of course proved eminently satisfactory. His Royal Highness inquired the amount of salary which Christian expected? This little matter was soon arranged; and he was informed that Baron Farthenless, the Privy Purse, would settle with him weekly. The audience now terminated; and Christian was conducted from the august presence by the Chevalier Kadger, the odour emanating from whose breath and garments had not appeared to affect the olfactory nerves of his ducal master in the slightest degree, although it was particularly strong, and in its combinations none of the most fragrant. But then, Christian thought to himself, the Duke had perhaps grown accustomed to inhale the atmosphere which his Equerry carried about with him; and the old adage says that "use is second nature."

On gaining the ante-chamber, where Baron Raggidbak was again found seated in the arm-chair near the fire, the Chevalier Kadger laid his hand upon Christian's shoulder; and said, "Me and de Baron sall drink your one goot health in one bottle of wine—or two bottle, begar!—and you sall stop some minutes for de same."

"Vare goot!" exclaimed Baron Raggidbak, caressing his beard with one hand while he gave the bell-pull a violent tug with the other.

Christian could not of course help tarrying in compliance with the wishes of his aristocratic friends: he accordingly sat down; and in a few moments the waiter made his appearance.

"Mine goot mans," said Baron Raggidbak, "you sall go for to bring up two bottles of de port and de sherry wines for de present gumpany."

"A bottle of each, my lord?" said the waiter, putting his hand up to his head with a half-hesitating, half-reflective air.

"Dat is it," responded the Baron: but as the waiter still appeared undecided, and hung about the door as if wanting to say something but not exactly liking to do so, the Groom of the Stole placed his hand on Christian's shoulder, saying, with a certain emphasis, "Dis sall be de yong mans what sall pay for de treat for de present gumpany."

The waiter now suddenly became more cheerful in aspect, and quitted the room with a blithe alacrity. Christian could scarcely believe that he had heard aright. What! his lordship, Baron Raggidbak, Groom of the Stole to a reigning Duke—and the scarcely less distinguished Chevalier Kadger, Equerry to the same illustrious personage—condescending to drink at his expense!—and what was more, inviting themselves to do it! For the moment Christian felt as if he were in the midst of a dream: or else—what really did seem more probable—that he was in the midst of hungry adventurers. But he said not a word; and in a few moments the waiter re-appeared with a decanter of port and another of sherry on a tray, which likewise bore the bill duly made out and receipted,—the wine being charged six shillings a bottle.

"Now, my goot friend," said Baron Raggidbak, "out wid de monies. Dis am de German fashion of making——what you sall call it?——Oh! de acquaintance."

Christian produced a sovereign; and on receiving the change from the waiter, he left half-a-crown lying on the tray for that individual's own fee—a liberality which procured for him a very low bow. The Chevalier Kadger proceeded to fill the glasses—which himself and Baron Raggidbak showed themselves very good hands at emptying also. Christian drank but little; and his abstemiousness was highly complimented by his two aristocratic friends, who had good reason to be rejoiced at it, inasmuch as there was all the more for themselves. The two decanters were emptied in an inconceivably short space of time; and Baron Raggidbak dropped a hint relative to a second supply: but Christian was anxious to run up to the Regent's Park and tell his sister that he had obtained another situation—so that he rose to take his departure, wondering infinitely not merely at the conduct of the Groom of the Stole and the Equerry-in-waiting, but also at the entire appearance of the Duke and his retinue.

As he was about to issue from the hotel, he was encountered by the same waiter who had brought up the wine, and who was now crossing the hall at the moment. The man paused, and looked at Christian as if he wished to speak to him; and as our young hero himself was anxious to hear something more relative to the personages amongst whom accident had thrown him, he paused likewise. The waiter thereupon said, "Just step into this room, sir."

Christian followed the man, who carefully closed the door; and then said, "I beg your pardon, sir, but as I see that you are a liberal young gentleman, I don't like you to stand the chance of being robbed."

"Robbed?" ejaculated our hero. "Why—is not that really a Duke?"

"Oh, yes, sir! he is a Duke fast enough: but such a Duke!" exclaimed the waiter contemptuously. "I am sure my master would like to be well quit of him and all his beggarly crew of hungry Germans, with their hard names, their airs, their meanness, and their insolence. Perhaps you saw, sir, that I hesitated to bring up the wine when that fellow Raggidbak ordered it? The fact is the Duke has given positive instructions that nothing is to be supplied except by command of Count Wronki, the Lord Steward."

"But this is most extraordinary!" cried young Ashton, lost in bewilderment.

"Oh, extraordinary indeed!" echoed the waiter. "I never saw such a wretched set of paupers in my life. They don't seem to have a farthing amongst them—I mean the Duke's retinue; and between you and me, sir, I don't think the Duke himself is over troubled with cash. Of course you know that whenever he visits this country, all his travelling expenses, both coming and going, are paid by the English government. These rooms too which they occupy, are paid from a certain quarter."

"From whence?" inquired Christian.

"Why, from Buckingham Palace, to be sure," responded the waiter. "Ah! the people generally little think what a mean beggarly horde these German fellows are, with all their titles of Duke, Count, Baron, and Chevalier. I tell you what, sir—there isn't as much linen amongst them all as any ordinary English gentleman possesses; and such linen as it is!—why, the washerwoman is afraid it will fall to pieces in the rubbing and wringing out. And then their clothes too!" added the waiter, shrugging his shoulders with the supremest contempt. "But what I wanted to guard you against, sir, is this—that if you let those fellows get hold of you, they will spunge upon you—they will make you pay for wines, spirits, and cigars—they will pluck you like any pigeon. So pray take care; and don't say that I dropped you this hint, as it would only get me into trouble."

Christian reassured the man upon the point—thanked him for his well-meant information—and took his departure, wondering still more at the various details he had just received in respect to the German Duke and his retainers.

Having paid a hasty visit to Christina, Christian returned to his lodgings at the parish-clerk's house, and he sought in one of the books which he possessed, some information relative to the Duchy of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. He found that it was of the meanest territorial extent—with a population of a few thousands of souls—with a beggarly revenue—and with an army enumerated only by hundreds. He had previously no very exalted idea of the German Principalities: but he had not suspected that any one of them was so poor and paltry as this. However, he thought to himself that his own salary would be tolerably safe, and that it would at least enhance his interest to be enabled at the close of his engagement to obtain a testimonial from a reigning Duke.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A PLOT.

We must now once more direct the reader's attention to the interior of Madame Angelique's establishment; and if we peep into the splendidly furnished apartment whence there was the mirror-contrived communication with the tailor's house next door, we shall find Lettice with the German and French girls, sitting together. Lettice Rodney therefore—disregarding Mr. Redcliffe's advice—had returned to that abode of splendid infamy.

It was noon, on the day following that on which Christian called at Mivart's Hotel; and thus Lettice had been back exactly one week. She had told Madame Angelique everything that had occurred: but vainly had she endeavoured to recollect who the individual could be who had extorted from her the revelation of the whole proceedings. It will be remembered that she fancied his voice was not unfamiliar to her, but that she had totally failed to obtain a glimpse of his countenance in the darkness of the night: so that the scene with him had ended by leaving her still in complete ignorance of who he was. Madame Angelique was much troubled: for she could not help thinking that the same individual who had thus behaved towards Lettice Rodney, had spirited away Eveleen O'Brien. Not for an instant, however, did her suspicions rest on Mr. Redcliffe: for he had paid her bounteously at the time, and the girls had assured her that he had entered with spirit into the festivities of that particular evening. As for the Duke of Marchmont, Madame Angelique did not dread his anger on Lettice's account: for under all the circumstances, she did not consider that any blame could attach itself to the young woman, who, when menaced with the law, and finding the plot more or less known to her mysterious midnight questioner, had naturally saved herself from ulterior consequences by adopting the course which is known to the reader. Indeed, Madame Angelique was herself somewhat irritated against the Duke, that he should have so seriously compromised her own establishment in respect to the dresses, and likewise in respect to the purpose for which Lettice Rodney had been required in the neighbourhood of Oaklands. A hastily penned note from his Grace, written immediately after the explosion of the plot, had assured Madame Angelique that she had little to dread on the part of the Duchess; as he (the Duke) would guarantee this much; and though Madame Angelique might thenceforth lose the custom of the Duchess, she should receive an ample indemnification from Marchmont's own purse.

Thus stood matters in respect to Madame Angelique and her establishment after the transaction at Oaklands;—and now, having given these necessary explanations, we return to the luxuriously furnished apartment in which we find Lettice Rodney, Armantine, and Linda seated.

It was noon; and they were all three in a charming *deshabillée*. Lettice was reclining in a chair, reading a new novel aloud to her companions—both of whom, as the reader will recollect, understood English to perfection. The fine

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form of Lettice Rodney was stretched out in a voluptuous abandonment, which, though at the moment unstudied, gave a more luxurious effect to the rich contours of her shape. Linda, the German girl, was seated upon the sofa: Armantine, the French one, occupied a chair opposite to Lettice;—and both were all attention to some very pathetic love-passage which Lettice was at the time reading to them. Presently the door opened somewhat abruptly; and Madame Angelique made her appearance.

"What do you think, my dear girls?" she exclaimed in considerable excitement: "that treacherous wretch, Eveleen O'Brien, has gone back to her parents!"

Lettice started in astonishment: but both Linda and Armantine sighed audibly, as they inwardly wished that they possessed homes to which they dared return.

"Yes—it is true!" cried Madame Angelique, who was too much excited to observe the half-subdued evidences of compunction and regret, as well as of wistful longing, which the two foreign girls had displayed. "And what is more, she has had the impudence to write to me!"

"And what does she say?" asked Lettice, full of curiosity.

"She says that through the generous intervention of a friend whom heaven sent her, she has been snatched away from a life of infamy. Only think of this! She, who—as well as you, my dears—revelled in every luxury, eat and drank of the best, and wore the handsomest clothes——"

"But does she threaten you?" inquired Lettice.

"No: and that is the only consolation in the matter," responded Madame Angelique, somewhat softened as she thought of it. "She says that her parents received her with open arms—and that as they at once assured her an everlasting veil should be drawn over the past, they pressed her for no explanations in respect to her career since she had left them."

"And of course she does not want to make a noise about it?" observed Lettice. "But why did she write to you?"

"To state that as she is disposed to practise the utmost forbearance, and never allude to me or my proceedings, she stipulates that on my part I will refrain from ever mentioning Eveleen O'Brien as having been an inmate of this house."

"Ah! I suppose she means to become respectable now!" interjected Lettice, with a contemptuous smile.

"And perhaps she hopes to marry!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "But perchance things won't go on quite so pleasantly as she anticipates. Look here, my dear Lettice!—it is of the utmost consequence we should discover who the man was that extorted those revelations from you the other day, down in the country. It is dangerous that there should be a person knowing so much about you as he evidently did—and therefore about this establishment—and we on the other hand not to have the slightest conjecture who *he* is!"

"Perhaps he is the same kind friend," observed Lettice, sneeringly, "whom heaven sent to restore Eveleen to her parents?"

"That's exactly what I think!" exclaimed Madame Angelique; "because her flight and that affair down at Oaklands took place pretty nearly at the same time. Now, Eveleen knew certain things about the counterpart dresses; and she knew also that you were going off to the neighbourhood of Oaklands——"

"And therefore it is only reasonable to conclude," exclaimed Lettice, "that Eveleen, the traitress! gave that mysterious stranger certain information which put him on the watch and led him to intercept me."

"Should you like a trip to Ireland, my dear girl?" inquired Madame Angelique, patting Lettice caressingly on her bare shoulder.

"That I should!" exclaimed the young woman.

"Then you shall go," responded Madame Angelique. "You can throw yourself in the way of Eveleen—you can affect to be very penitent, and to have left my establishment altogether——"

"Oh, leave me to manage it!" cried Lettice, already exulting in the prospect of success. "I will worm myself into Eveleen's confidence—I will get everything out of her. When shall I depart?"

"To-day, if you will," rejoined Madame Angelique: "no time need be lost! And remember!—if you can entice Eveleen back again, so much the better. She is much too beautiful to lose; and besides, it would be a glorious triumph for us to accomplish."

The preparations could not however be made for Lettice Rodney's departure on that same day: but at nine o'clock on the ensuing morning she took her place in a first-class carriage at Euston Square, her destination being Liverpool by way of Birmingham. There was only one other passenger in the same compartment; and this was a lady of nearly the same age as Lettice herself, as well as being by no means unlike her in personal appearance. She was almost of as tall a stature and of similarly well developed contours of shape: she was decidedly handsome too, though not of so remarkably striking a beauty as the other. She was well dressed: her appearance was genteel, and indicative of the well-bred lady. As the train started, Lettice surveyed her companion, and was surveyed by this companion in return. They were the only two occupants of the compartment; and being of the same sex, it was but natural that they should soon get into conversation. Lettice Rodney assumed, as a matter of course, as modest and retired an air as possible, in order to be consistent with the part of a respectable lady which she was playing, as well as to obviate any suspicion that might arise as to her true character: for there are thousands of people in this world—especially among the female sex—who, though displaying a bold hardihood and brazen effrontery when in the midst of scenes of vicious dissipation, are nevertheless anxious enough to cloak their true characters when beyond the sphere of their irregularities. In the same way that the poor often struggle and strive to put on the appearance of ease and competency, so do the immoral endeavour to apparel themselves with the raiment of morality, and the immodest to assume the air and complexion of modesty.

During the first half-hour the discourse was limited to the mere exchange of those casual observations and indifferent remarks which, with persons meeting for the first time, are the neces-

sary preliminaries to a more familiar and continuous strain of conversation. Lettice found her travelling-companion to be a young lady of unassuming manners, somewhat simple-minded, and disposed to enter with an ingenuous frankness upon the objects of the journey on which she was bent. Lettice chose likewise to be communicative,—not however to reveal the real truth in respect to the motives of her own journey, but to chatter away in her own style for the sake of appearing important in the estimation of her travelling companion. She accordingly stated that she was on her way to Ireland to pass a few weeks with some friends in the neighbourhood of Dublin,—dropping a hint that these friends were of aristocratic rank, and availing herself of the opportunity to lead her fellow-traveller to infer that she belonged to a wealthy and influential family. The reader knows how much of all this was true: it was however believed by Lettice Rodney's travelling-companion, who was inspired by such confidences to become all the more communicative on her own part.

It now transpired that this lady was named Rayner, and that she was a widow. Presently it further appeared that her Christian name was Louisa,—an intimation which elicited from Lettice Rodney's lips a remark on the singularity of the coincidence that their names should have the same initials. In short, as the journey progressed, the two ladies became more and more intimate and familiar; and inasmuch as no other passenger was introduced to their compartment of the carriage at any of the stations where the train stopped, the flow of their conversation proceeded uninterruptedly. We may now record those details which Lettice Rodney received from the lips of Mrs. Rayner, in respect to certain circumstances of her life, as well as the special motives which had led to the journey she was now undertaking.

It appeared that Louisa was left an orphan at the age of eleven,—both her parents being carried off suddenly by some epidemic disease, and with only a short interval between their deaths. Louisa was then removed to the house of a certain Mr. Anthony Pollard, a lawyer at Liverpool, and who was left her guardian. He was no relation: but doubtless Louisa's father, when making his will, had his own good reasons for appointing this gentleman to act as trustee for whatsoever property he might leave his daughter. Mr. Pollard was an elderly man—a widower—of eccentric habits—loving money with a miserly devotion—and carrying his parsimony to almost every extreme which is usually associated with the greed of gain and the passion of mammon-worship. Louisa remained but a few weeks at his house, and was then sent to a boarding-school at some town a considerable distance off. Here she was kept throughout the holidays; and though kindly treated by the mistress of the establishment, and adequately supplied with pocket-money,—yet still she could not help feeling how bitter and poignant it was to know of no place in the wide world which she could look forward to visit or be enabled to speak of as *her home*. At this school she remained until she was seventeen,—never once seeing Mr. Pollard—only occasionally hearing from him, when in a curtly written letter he remitted her money and expressed a hope that she was attentive and docile to her preceptress. But no hope that she was happy was ever hinted at in those letters: it appeared as if her guardian considered he was fulfilling the extent of his duty by acting as a mere man of business, and that he was by no means bound to demonstrate any of those kindnesses which her lost parents would have shown, or which she might have looked for on the part of relations—if she had possessed any.

The schoolmistress was occasionally visited by a nephew of her own—a young gentleman of handsome person, agreeable manners, and pleasing address. He was four years older than Louisa, and consequently twenty-one at the period when she attained her seventeenth year. He had just inherited the little property bequeathed to him by his own parents; for he likewise was an orphan. To be brief, a mutual affection sprang up on the part of the school-girl and the nephew of the schoolmistress: tender billets were exchanged—vows of eternal fidelity were pledged. The circumstance was discovered—and the young gentleman was ordered by his indignant aunt to absent himself altogether from the house so long as Louisa remained beneath the roof. The schoolmistress was a well-principled and conscientious woman: she communicated at once with Mr. Pollard at Liverpool; and this gentleman wrote to signify his intention of proceeding in the course of a day or two to fetch his ward away from the school. The romance had thus reached that point at which the various complications could not possibly lead to any other result than that which the reader doubtless anticipates. The nephew of the schoolmistress found means to communicate secretly with Louisa: she was almost broken-hearted at the thought of being eternally separated from her lover, and of being borne back again to her guardian's cheerless house at Liverpool—of which house her recollections of some six years back, were by no means agreeable. She therefore yielded to the entreaties of her admirer: she fled with him: but he was an honourable young man—and the elopement was immediately crowned by marriage.

The newly-wedded pair proceeded to France, whence Louisa—now Mrs. Rayner—wrote to Mr. Pollard, explaining to him that she had consulted her own happiness in the step which she had taken, and that if she had thereby proved undutiful and disobedient to the will of her guardian, she solicited his forgiveness. She did not however experience much, if any compunction at having thus flown, as it were, in Mr. Pollard's face; for his conduct towards her had never been calculated by any kindness to win her esteem. The letter he wrote back, was pretty well that which might have been expected from the callous-minded man of business. It was to the effect, that as she had chosen to regulate her own destinies, and cater for her own happiness according to the dictates of her inclinations, he could acquit himself of any violation of the trust confided to him by her deceased parents: he informed her that she was entitled to three thousand pounds on attaining the age of twenty-one—and that in the meantime he would regularly remit her the interest. He offered no felicitations upon her marriage—but on the other hand, gave no direct expression to any displeasure on his own part. The letter contained not the re-

motest hint to the effect that he would be gratified to receive a visit from herself and her husband: it did not even so much as intimate that if circumstances should bring them near Liverpool, he hoped they would call upon him:—but this formal and purely business-like communication wound up by the announcement that when the young lady should reach the period of her majority, she must present herself to him in order to sign the necessary releases and receive the amount of her little fortune.

Happily enough passed away the two years of Louisa's wedded life: for to two years was it limited!—and as is often the case in this world, the dream of felicity which is soonest to be dissipated is the brightest and most beautiful while it lasts. Mr. Rayner was drowned in a boating-excursion at some French seaport where they were staying at the time; and thus, with a cruel and terrible abruptness, the unfortunate Louisa found herself a widow. When the roseate atmosphere in which the soul has been for a period accustomed to exist, is thus suddenly changed into a worse than Egyptian darkness, it appears to the sufferer as if this black obscurity would be eternal—and that the mind, paralyzed by dread consternation and crushed by overwhelming grief, could never by its own energies accomplish an issue thence. But there is no misfortune so terrible that the sense it produces will not gradually pass into a phase of resignation; and then from resignation there is a natural transition to that improved and healthier state of feeling in which the mind begins to discover that the world may yet have sources of happiness left for its experience.

Two years had elapsed since the death of Mr. Rayner; and Louisa had put off her widow's-weeds about a fortnight before the date on which we find her travelling in the society of Lettice Rodney. By a somewhat singular coincidence, too, she attained her majority on the very day when the period of her mourning expired. The reader may now easily surmise for what purpose she was bound to Liverpool:—it was to call upon her guardian Anthony Pollard, the miserly old lawyer, and receive from him the amount of her fortune. Such was the narrative which Lettice Rodney learnt from Mrs. Rayner's lips; and the young woman could not help secretly wishing that she herself was on her way to receive three thousand pounds, instead of to carry out the deeply devised plot in respect to Eveleen O'Brien.

"Your tale, Mrs. Rayner, has deeply interested me," said Lettice. "But do you not tremble at the thought of appearing in the presence of such a hard stern man as your guardian Mr. Pollard seems to be?"

"I can assure you, Miss Rodney," replied the handsome widow, "that I experience no such trepidation. It is true that full ten years have now elapsed since I last beheld him: but my memory has faithfully retained the impression which Mr. Pollard made upon me at the time, during the few weeks I was beneath his roof. He is a man of the fewest possible words; and I am confident that he will not seek to engage me in any unnecessary discourse. He will not speak of the past more than is absolutely requisite to the settlement of the business which is to bring us in contact. I therefore entertain no apprehension that he will in any way revive the poignancy of my feelings on account of the cruel and irreparable loss which I have sustained. Indeed, so far as I can exercise my judgment on the subject, I have every reason to believe that our interview will prove a brief one, and that within an hour from the moment of our meeting the business will be settled."

"I am truly glad," observed Lettice, "to receive the assurance that you anticipate no manifestation of ill-feeling on Mr. Pollard's part. Although we have known each other but a few short hours, I feel an interest in all that concerns you."

"And this interest, Miss Rodney, is reciprocated," rejoined Mrs. Rayner.

The discourse continued awhile in a similar strain: but the reader will scarcely require to be informed that while Lettice expressed a feeling of interest more for the sake of saying something than because she really experienced it, and also for the purpose of making her companion believe that she was a very right-minded young lady,—Mrs. Rayner's assurances of kindly sympathies were, on the other hand, perfectly genuine and sincere. As the discourse continued, Mrs. Rayner was naturally led on to minuter details in respect to the past incidents of her life; and as Lettice could not bear to be silent or unoccupied—and moreover, inasmuch as she was endowed with no small share of true feminine curiosity—she, by her interjected observations, as well as by her questions, encouraged her companion to as much communicativeness as she chose to demonstrate. Thus did the hours pass away, while the train was pursuing its course of almost marvellous rapidity; and the two ladies mutually congratulated themselves that they should thus have been thrown together.

It was at some point—no matter precisely which—between Birmingham and Manchester, that the conversation was all in an instant cut short, as if a thunderbolt had come crashing through the roof of the carriage. As Lettice Rodney subsequently described the occurrence, she was for a moment—and only for that single moment—sensitive to an abrupt shock: it was quick as the eye can wink—and the next instant consciousness abandoned her. As she slowly came back to her senses, she became aware that she was lying on the slope of an embankment, and that some gentleman, of middle-age, was bending over her, and ministering restoratives. It appeared to her like a dream: she closed her eyes as if to shut out all external objects, the better to concentrate her mental vision inwardly, and thus arrive at some comprehending of what it was that she thought and felt. There was a dull heavy sounding in the brain—a sense of numbness over all the faculties—a blending of uncertainty and vague consternation in the mind. Again she opened her eyes—but only to receive additional confirmation of the awful suspicion which, hitherto dim, indefinite, and clouded, had hung in her brain. The gentleman spoke a few kind words of mingled encouragement and inquiry; and these still farther served to stamp the horrible conviction in the soul of Lettice that what she had fancied and apprehended was no dream, but all a too hideous reality. In a word, an accident had happened to the train;—several of the carriages, being thrown off the line, were literally dashed to atoms; and

numerous deaths, as well as frightful injuries, mutilations, and contusions, were the consequence.

The gentleman whom Lettice found bending over her, was a surgeon who happened to be in the ill-fated train; and as he was unhurt, he had rendered all possible assistance to those passengers who, though escaping death, were otherwise less fortunate than himself. Lettice had been merely stunned by the first shock of the accident: she was in all other respects completely uninjured; and in a few minutes after her return to consciousness, she was enabled to rise and move about. The scene which presented itself to her contemplation, was a frightful and a sad one. The line was encumbered in one part with the overturned carriages—and in another strown with the fragments of the shattered ones. Boxes, trunks, and portmanteaux were heaped pell-mell together,—some having been broken open by the fall, and the articles of apparel, both male and female, all cast out and mixed together. On the slope of the embankment several wounded persons lay here and there; and in another part there was a horrible array of mutilated and disfigured corpses. As the eyes of Lettice wandered over this fearful grouping of the dead, her heart sickened within her, and she felt her brain reel, on catching sight of the apparel of her travelling-companion, the unfortunate Mrs. Rayner. Yes—but it was only by the raiment that the deceased could be thus recognised: for her countenance was so horribly disfigured that scarcely a lineament, much less a trace of its former beauty, remained. Lettice—though, as the reader is aware, far from possessing any extreme sensibility—was nevertheless shocked and horrified at this tragic occurrence which had thus cut off an amiable lady in the bloom of her youth as well as in the early summer of her beauty, and at the very time she was on her way to receive the inheritance bequeathed by her parents. Lettice staggered back as she averted her eyes from the shocking spectacle, and would have fallen if she had not been caught in the arms of the surgeon who was still near her.

Those who have been unfortunate enough to witness a terrific railway accident, are but too painfully aware of the dread confusion which is superadded to the horror of the scene; and those who have been happy enough to escape such a spectacle, may nevertheless grasp with their imagination the full range of its supervening circumstances. The moans of the wounded sufferers mingling with the shrieks, the cries, and the lamentations of relatives who have survived the dead—the hurrying to and fro of half-dismayed officials—the process of disencumbering the line as speedily as possible—and the flocking of horrified persons to the spot, when the accident occurs in the close vicinage of a town,—these are the salient characteristics of the scene following upon the appalling drama. And so it all was on the present occasion. But it does not suit the purpose of our tale to dwell at any greater length thereon: suffice it to say that the surgeon who had hitherto shown so much attention to Lettice Rodney, now advised her to enter one of the vehicles which were by this time near the spot, and proceed to the town which was at no great distance. He assured her that she must not think of continuing her journey until the morrow; for that at least a good night's rest was requisite after the shock which she had experienced, and which, unless she was careful, might be followed by concussion of the brain. She did indeed feel like one bewildered and whose thoughts were all in confusion. The medical man was kind and attentive: he gave her his arm, and conducted her towards the piles of luggage that she might select her own boxes. Here again was a fresh source of bewilderment for Lettice Rodney: for she beheld some of her own dresses and other articles of apparel scattered about. The surgeon assisted her to separate them from the rest with which they were mixed up; and on learning from her what her name was, he took the trouble to search for everything which was marked with the initials L. R. In short, after much trouble, perplexity, and confusion, the good-natured surgeon succeeded in filling a couple of boxes the lids of which were broken off, with those effects which Lettice had either been enabled to point out, or which he himself conceived to belong to her from the indications already mentioned: then, having seen her safe into a vehicle, together with her baggage, he took his leave,—hastening to render his assistance to the next sufferer who required it.

Lettice Rodney was borne to the principal hotel in the town near to the spot where the accident occurred; and feeling exceedingly unwell, she at once retired to bed. It was not until the third day after the accident that the effects of the shock began to wear off. It had been followed, as the medical man more than half predicted, by slight concussion, evidenced in a certain ringing in the ears and a continuous droning sound in the brain, as well as by heaviness of the head and confusion of the thoughts. During these three days, therefore, Lettice kept her bed, and was attended upon by a surgeon living in the town. When however she began to get better, she felt anxious to learn some particulars as to the results of the accident; and a local newspaper was accordingly furnished her. The particulars of the tragic occurrence itself, as well as of the proceedings before the Coroner, were given with the wonted minuteness of detail; and in perusing the sad narrative, Lettice observed that the names of all the killed were given with the exception of one lady, who was represented as being altogether unknown. It appeared, indeed, that she had no card-case with her; nor about her person was there discovered any letter or other document affording the slightest clue to the establishment of her identity. Now, as the name of Mrs. Rayner was altogether omitted from the list of killed, Lettice Rodney at once comprehended that it was this very name which ought to fill up the blank left in the said catalogue, and that the unknown lady thus described was none other than her travelling-companion!

Lettice was making up her mind to give this information to the landlord of the hotel, or to the surgeon who was attending upon her, with a view to have it conveyed to the proper quarter,—when she began the inspection of her trunks for the first time since she became an inmate of that hotel. She now discovered that there was a variety of articles of linen which did not belong to her, mixed up with those effects which were really her own: but when she perceived that the former were all marked with the initials L. R., she beheld the

solution of the mystery. She now recollected the manner in which her things had been looked out from amidst the scattered effects on the scene of the accident; and as she was still farther examining the boxes, to ascertain to what extent she had thus become the unintentional self-appropriatrix of the property of the deceased lady, she discovered a small writing-desk, with the initials L. R. on a brass-plate upon the lid. The desk was open,—the violence with which it had been thrown out at the time from the box that contained it, having no doubt caused the lock to yield; and Lettice Rodney, being hampered with no over-nice scruple, unhesitatingly proceeded to the examination of the contents of the desk. She found several documents closely relating to the deceased Mrs. Rayner's affairs,—the certificate of her birth, as well as that of her marriage—a French passport, describing her personally with as much accuracy as such official papers are enabled, in a limited number of details, to exhibit—and several letters from Mr. Pollard, the lawyer, written at different times and advising her of periodical remittances. There were likewise *memoranda*, evidently penned by the deceased lady herself, and indicating various continental places which she had visited both previous and subsequent to her husband's death—the whole affording a tolerably comprehensive clue to her movements since her elopement from the boarding-school. In a word, the several papers discovered in this desk, superadded to the oral explanations given by Mrs. Rayner in the railway carriage, served to render Lettice as intimately acquainted as it was possible for her to become, with the affairs of the deceased lady.

While Miss Rodney was thus engaged in the perusal of the contents of the desk, an idea gradually began to arise in her mind,—at first vague, indefinite, and impalpable—then acquiring shape and consistency—growing stronger, until at last it became an object perfectly fitted for serious and deliberate contemplation. Lettice sat down and pondered deeply thereon. She surveyed the matter from every distinct point of view—reckoned all the chances of success and the probabilities of failure,—at the same time balancing the risk she might incur with the prize she might gain by playing the stroke boldly. Her mind was made up; and she now no longer considered it expedient to throw any light upon the name of the deceased lady who was represented as unknown in the catalogue of the killed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MISER.

In by no means one of the best streets of Liverpool, was situated the dwelling of Mr. Anthony Pollard, attorney-at-law. He has already been described as a widower, and of grasping miserly habits. Mrs. Rayner, when a child—ten years previous to the time at which we have found her speaking on the subject to Lettice Rodney—had observed his parsimonious character, and was disgusted by it: but during those ten years it had become still more inveterate in its greed for gold—more intense in its eagerness for gain. He had thus acquired all the very worst attributes of the miser,—sacrificing every personal comfort to the sole object which he had in view. And yet, not to his knowledge, did he possess a single relation on the face of the earth: there was no one whom he loved for whose sake he hoarded up gold—no one whom he cared for, to inherit it. The thought troubled him not that when the cold hand of death should be laid heavily on his shoulder, sending through him that congealing chill which knows no thaw,—his heaped-up riches would either devolve to the Crown, or be dissipated in the course of the law's disputes, or become the prey of any plunderers who might gather in his last moments at his bed-side, as the ravens troop to where the corpse will anon be on the field destined for the battle. It was not the question of who should inherit all this wealth, that occupied the mind of Anthony Pollard: it was sufficient for him that *there* was his golden image which he had set up for his own particular worship,—no matter what worshipper might succeed him, nor whether the image itself might be shattered, at his death, by the hand of greedy litigants or of plunderers intent upon a division of the spoil. Most strange indeed is the money-worship of the miser, whose idolatry is purely egotistical, and who ministers not as a high-priest to lead others in the track of the same devotion, as well as towards the same object, and to cherish the hope of possessing the same idol!

Mr. Pollard was a man well stricken in years—tall, lean, and lank—with shrivelled limbs—a cadaverous skin—a sinister expression of countenance—and an eye ever restless in the suspicious glances it was continuously flinging round about. Though so greedy of gain, Pollard was a just man after his own fashion: that is to say, he would scruple not, by means of all the engines of usury, to grind his victims down to the very dust—aye, or even reduce them to beggary, so long as he obtained his own profit: but on the other hand he would religiously fulfil whatsoever obligation he undertook, and whatsoever trust was confided to him. Thus was it that throughout all his dealings in respect to Mrs Rayner, his conduct was marked by the strictest probity; and it is therefore to be presumed that her father, ere his death, had selected him as a trustee from a knowledge of the illimitable confidence that might be reposed in him. Of late years Mr. Pollard had grown so mistrustful of every one about him, that he had almost completely given up his practice as a solicitor, so as to avoid the necessity of keeping clerks and of absenting himself for hours together from his home. Besides, he found money-lending a far more lucrative avocation, and one which he could manage entirely by himself. Thus, at the period when we now introduce him to the reader, he had no clerks in his employment; and his growing habits of parsimony had led him on to diminish his domestic establishment, limiting it at length to a housekeeper and a drab of a servant-girl. The housekeeper who was now in his service, had been with him barely three weeks: but on applying for the situation, she had produced such excellent testimonials, signed by ladies of rank with whom she represented herself to have lived, that Mr. Pollard had unhesitatingly engaged her. Besides, she came from London; and this was an additional

recommendation in her favour; because the old man had found—or fancied that he had found the Liverpool servants so extravagant and dishonest, he had made a vow never to take another housekeeper from amongst them. Therefore, when Mrs. Webber—which was the name of the new superintendent of the miser's household—had presented herself three weeks back as a candidate for the post that had fallen vacant, she was speedily accepted—and all the more readily too, because she was so exceedingly moderate on the score of wages. We have spoken of a maid-of-all-work who was kept in addition to Mrs. Webber; and it is requisite for the purposes of our tale that we should add that this girl did not sleep in the house, but came at an early hour in the morning and left at about eight or nine in the evening.

Mr. Pollard's house had never been handsomely furnished; and of late years the greater portion of it was shut up,—it being entirely useless, as he never gave parties—never received guests—and his only visitors were those who came on business. He did not habitually sit in the only parlour that was kept for use: but there was a sort of store-room at the back of the house, on the ground-floor, where he principally sat. The reason can be explained in a few words:—the apartment had certain defences which rendered it, so to speak, a stronghold of the miser's fortress. It had immense iron bars at its only window: it had a huge massive door, that could not possibly be forced open without creating a considerable disturbance; and there was moreover an iron safe let into the thick wall;—so that in every respect was this apartment the one best calculated for Mr. Pollard's use. Here, then, was he accustomed to sit during the day,—proceeding only to the parlour to receive visitors on business: here, in this strong room likewise, did he keep his hoards in the iron safe; and here of late years had he thought fit to sleep at night. For the old miser had grown excessively deaf; and not for worlds would he have slept in any other part of the house, with the chance of an entry being effected by either window or door, and he too dull of hearing to catch the sounds! Every night, before seeking his bed, did he lock and barricade the massive door of the strong room: but it is even a question whether with such defences as were constituted by that wooden barrier and by the bars of the window, the miser slumbered in tranquillity.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening—a few days after the railway accident—that we shall find old Anthony Pollard taking his tea and supper (which two meals he, for economy's sake, blended in one) in the strong room just alluded to. A single tallow-candle burnt upon the table: the crockery was of the commonest description; and the bone—for it was a mere bone—upon a cracked dish, was only fit to become a dog's portion, and not to furnish a meal for a hungry man. Unfortunately Mr. Pollard could not over-rule nature's cravings, though he was always endeavouring to persuade himself that he could not afford to gratify them, and that he should be ruined if he did. Thus, though the wretched man really longed for a good substantial meal—and could have devoured it too at any other person's expense, if favoured with an invitation to supper—he nevertheless tried to pick a last morsel from that mutton-bone which really had naught left upon it.

Presently the huge door of the room slowly opened; and Mrs. Webber made her appearance.

"Well, is Alice gone?" demanded Mr. Pollard, thus alluding to the maid-of-all-work.

"Yes, sir—she has gone," was the housekeeper's response, delivered in a loud shrill tone on account of her master's deafness. "And what's more, the slut grumbled because she said I did not give her enough bread and cheese to take home for her supper."

"Ah! you are a good woman, Mrs. Webber!" exclaimed Pollard,—"a very good woman!—thrifty and economical! You are the only housekeeper who has ever yet shown a regard to my interests."

"I always mean to do so, sir," rejoined the woman, with an air of great obsequiousness, notwithstanding that she had to cry out in that shrill manner. "I have let the parlour fire go out, sir," she continued, "as I don't suppose the lady you have been expecting for the last few days will make her appearance this evening?"

"Dear me, how provoking that she does not come!" ejaculated Pollard. "She wrote and said she should be with me a few days back; and here, every day since, have I been having a fire kept in the parlour, and little extras in the larder—because, you see, as I have already told you, Mrs. Webber, I must ask her to stay a day or two with me."

"Well, sir, of course you know best," responded the housekeeper: "but I can't help thinking that you are putting yourself to a very unnecessary expense on account of this Mrs. Rayner."

"Ah! but she can't very well help making me a little present," ejaculated the lawyer, "when I pay her over her money and resign my guardianship. So this little extra civility, Mrs. Webber, will cost me nothing: or I should say, it is only a few shillings laid out at uncommon good interest:"—and the old miser rubbed his hands chucklingly as he thus spoke.

"And who knows, sir," inquired Mrs. Webber, "but what Mrs. Rayner was the lady who was killed the other day by the railway accident?"

"Not likely!" answered the lawyer; "because Mrs. Rayner would have been sure to have papers about her, to identify her: whereas it is very evident from the newspaper reports that the lady who was killed, and who was represented as unknown, had no such papers at all."

"And yet," remarked the housekeeper, "I saw in to-day's paper—which the potboy lent me when he brought the pint of beer for mine and Alice's dinner—that the lady has not been recognised or claimed by any one."

"Recognised indeed!" echoed Pollard: "how can a person with her face smashed to pieces, be possibly recognised? However, if Mrs. Rayner don't come in a day or two—and if I don't hear from her—I shall really begin to think you must be right, and that perhaps after all the unknown lady of the railway accident was my ward Louisa."

"And suppose she's dead, sir?" said the housekeeper inquiringly.

"Ah! if she's dead," responded Pollard, "I

must find out her deceased husband's relations, and hand them over the money: for she has got no relations of her own."

"Ah, sir, it's like your strict integrity!" exclaimed Mrs. Webber. "I heard speak of your character in Liverpool the day I applied for the situation; and all that was told me made me indeed most anxious to get it."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Webber," resumed Pollard; "the money shall be righteously dealt with. There it is," he added, glancing towards the safe: then, instantaneously perceiving that he had inadvertently let drop an admission which he was never in the habit of making to a soul—and into which he could only have been thus led by his confidence in his new housekeeper,—he hastened to say, "I mean the money is forthcoming——not here, of course——at the banker's!"

"Oh, to be sure, sir!" replied Mrs. Webber: "I know you keep very little ready money in the house; and for my part I tell Alice and the tradespeople that you never have any at all."

"Ah, that's right, my dear good Mrs. Webber!" exclaimed the old miser, his eyes glistening with satisfaction at the assurance she had just given him. "And it's quite true too! I don't think I've got five shillings in the place! No—I'm sure I have not!"—and thus speaking, Mr. Pollard drew forth from his pocket three-halfpence, a fourpenny-piece, a shilling, and a sixpence,—all of which coins he displayed on the palm of his hand, as if the production thereof were irrefragable evidence of the truth of his statement.

"You hav'n't seen this Mrs. Rayner for many years—have you, sir?" inquired the housekeeper.

"It must be ten good years since I last saw her," answered Pollard. "She was then a bit of a girl: but I have heard that she grew up into a very fine handsome woman. I don't suppose I could possibly recognise her; and for this very reason she is sure to bring the proper papers with her to prove her identity. And now you understand why it is that I don't believe the lady who was killed, *can* be Louisa, on account of the absence of all such corroborative documents about her person, or in any box or trunk that might have been supposed to belong to her."

Mrs. Webber now withdrew from her master's presence: but instead of retiring to the kitchen, or to her own chamber, she issued forth from the back-door of the house, and entered the yard. This was surrounded by walls; and in the one at the extremity there was a gate communicating with a narrow alley. The instant Mrs. Webber appeared upon the threshold of this back gate, she was joined by a man who had evidently been lurking in the lane. Not a syllable was spoken until the fellow entered the yard; and then, the gate being closed, he began conversing in an under-tone with Mrs. Webber.

"Well, what news?" he inquired, eagerly.

"Good, Barney," was the woman's response. "I have just succeeded in discovering that the old chap *has* got a mint of money in the iron safe."

"Ah! you're a clever 'un," said the Burker, in a tone of admiring satisfaction: "you all along declared as how you was convinced the old fogey had his blunt in that there wery identical place. Then I s'pose you mean the tidy little job to be done to-night?"

"Yes—to-night," answered Mrs. Webber.

"Is that lady come yet?"

"No—and that's why, after what I've learnt, the business must be for to-night."

"Well, it's a reg'lar blessin'," interjected the Burker, "that you've made up your mind at last, after all this here hesitating and dilly-dallying which has kept me and Bill Scott all on the tenting-'ooks of suspense."

"Why, you *must* understand, Barney," said the treacherous housekeeper, "that it was better to put off the business for a few days till I could obtain certain and positive information as to whether Pollard had got in the house the money he has to pay to Mrs. Rayner."

"Yes—and with the chance that Mrs. Rayner would suddenly turn up," growled the Burker, "receive her blunt, and walk off with it. It warn't good policy, marm—it warn't good policy."

"How absurdly you talk, Barney!" said Mrs. Webber angrily. "I tell you it was absolutely necessary to ascertain whether the old man really kept enough in his house to render it worth while——"

"Well, and now you've got at the rights of the matter," rejoined the delectable Mr. Barnes, "and the business is to be done right slick off-hand, with no more humbugging delays. Well, that's your sort, marm; and so we won't have no more argyfication on the pint. I'm blest if this Liverpool business won't be the best dodge we ever put up to. Wasn't it a lucky thing that Jack Smedley should have run down to Liverpool just arter that little bit of business with the lodger—and that he should have heerd tell of this old miser's wanting a housekeeper. I'm blowed if it isn't enough to make a cat or a helephant crack his precious tough sides to think how Pollard bit at them precious stiffkits which Jack drawd up his-self and put all them there fine names to."

"Well, well, Barney," interrupted Mrs. Webber, "don't stand wasting precious time here—but be off with you, and lay hold of Bill Scott, so as to be punctual."

"Bill's handy enow, and as ready to lend a hand as he is to swill his harf-an'-harf, or dewour his biled mutton for supper. And now tell us how it's all to be."

A few whispered arrangements were settled between the treacherous woman and her villanous accomplice; and then they separated. But it struck Barney the Burker that as he emerged from the back gate, his ear caught a sound as of some one darting away—and he farther conjectured that this some one was a female by the rustling of the garments. His keen eyes flung their piercing glances in the same direction: but the alley was involved in total darkness—and he could therefore distinguish nothing. He now rushed forward along the lane: but he overtook no one; and therefore endeavoured to persuade himself that he had either yielded to a false alarm, or else that it was some person belonging to an adjacent house speeding forth on a message, and that the incident had no particular significancy to warrant his transient apprehensions. Still there was a certain vague misgiving in the mind of Barney the Burker; and ere he returned to the

public-house where his worthy acolyte and pupil Bill Scott was awaiting his presence, he lurked about in the lane and its vicinage for upwards of a quarter of an hour. No farther circumstance, however, transpired to renew or confirm his suspicions; and as he at length moved slowly away towards the low public-house or boozing-ken where he had established his head-quarters, he said to himself, "No—it's nuffin to be scared at. As for ghostesses, blow me if I'm the chap which is likely to be surreptitious—superstitious, I mean: and as for any von a-listenin' at the gate and then bowling off in such a manner as that—no, it's all nonsense. 'Twas no doubt a servant-gal a-running for the beer; and some of them gals does flit along just for all the world as if they was wild."

While thus musing, Barney the Burker pursued his way towards the boozing-ken; and in the meantime we must see what had taken place within the dwelling of Mr. Anthony Pollard.

Scarcely had Mrs. Webber issued forth from the house into the back yard, when there was a knock at the front door; and Mr. Pollard, not hearing his housekeeper answer the summons, imagined that she must be otherwise engaged: he accordingly proceeded himself to ascertain who it might be. Taking the candle in his hand, he repaired to the door; and on opening it, perceived a lady of tall stature, well developed form, and good apparel. He at once conceived that this must be Mrs. Rayner; but with his habitual caution, he waited for her to announce herself.

"Mr. Pollard," said Lettice Rodney: for she indeed the visitress was: "we meet again after a long interval."

"It is then you, Louisa," said the old miser: and he took Lettice's hand. "Walk in: I have been expecting you: how is it that you came not before? You must speak loud—for I am afflicted with deafness."

"I experienced an accident," answered Lettice, "which detained me for a few days."

"What! on the railway?" ejaculated Pollard.

"Yes: I was in the train which ran off the lines and upset, causing such dreadful injuries and loss of life."

"Indeed! It was suggested to me," continued Pollard, "that you might be a passenger by that ill-fated train; and I was not altogether without the apprehension that you yourself might have been the unfortunate lady who was not recognised. However, I am heartily glad that it is otherwise; and I give you such poor welcome as my house can afford. Step into the parlour:"—then, as he led the way thither, he exclaimed with an air of vexation, "Dear me, how provoking! That housekeeper of mine has let the fire go out:"—although he perfectly well knew that such was the case.

"Pray, my dear Mr. Pollard," said Lettice, assuming a tone and manner of the sweetest affability, "do not put yourself out of the way on my account. Indeed, I am well aware that it is an unseemly hour for me to call: but I considered it my duty to pay my respects the very first moment of my arrival in your town. I have only just stepped from the train——"

"And you will take refreshment?" said Mr. Pollard, advancing towards the bell-pull.

"No, I thank you," responded Lettice: "I am wearied, and still unwell from the effects of the recent accident. Now that I have paid my respects and satisfied myself that you are in good health, I will repair to some hotel; and to-morrow will wait upon you at any hour you may choose to appoint."

"I thought that perhaps you would make my house your home for a day or two," answered Pollard: "indeed, your bed-chamber is in readiness. It is the very same you occupied ten years ago."

"You are exceedingly kind," answered Lettice: "and it would be ungrateful indeed on my part not to do your bidding in all things. I have to thank you, Mr. Pollard, for the manner in which you have carried out the trust confided to you by my deceased father—the regularity with which you have made me my periodical remittances——"

"There is no need to thank me," answered Pollard; "and yet I am of course glad that you are satisfied with my guardianship. You will give me credit, Louisa, for having abstained from reproach when you took a certain step——"

"Do not allude to it, my dear sir!" interrupted Lettice, carrying her kerchief to her eyes: "it reminds me but too painfully of my irreparable loss!"

"Yes, yes—it must," said the old miser. "You will remain here, then, for a day or two? It will please me to have the society of one whom I knew as a child, but whom I have not seen until now since her girlhood. I learnt that you had grown up into a fine handsome woman, and I was not deceived. I should not have known you—no, I should not have recognised you: you are different from what I expected you to be—and yet there is the same colour of the hair—yes, and the eyes too—but the profile has taken developments of which your girlhood gave but little promise."

While thus speaking, Anthony Pollard contemplated Lettice Rodney with earnest attention—but yet without any suspicion in his looks or his manner. This was an ordeal that put all her powers of hypocrisy and dissimulation to the test: it was however one which she had naturally foreseen she would have to pass through, and for which she was consequently prepared. She bore that scrutiny well,—affecting to smile and blush modestly at the compliment which was paid to her beauty;—and that blush also served as a veil for any little trifling confusion which she could not altogether prevent. It was quite evident that the old man had not the remotest misgiving as to the identity of his visitress with Mrs. Rayner; and it was therefore only with a business-like caution that he proceeded to give to the conversation that turn which it now took.

"We were speaking a few minutes back of the railway accident," he said; "and I may now observe that my apprehension as to your having lost your life on the occasion, was but a feeble one—inasmuch as the unrecognised lady appeared not to have in her possession any papers calculated to show who she was."

"And of course you well knew," observed Lettice, with a smile, "that such would not be the case with me. I have in this packet," she continued, producing a small paper parcel, "a variety of documents, which perhaps you will look over at your leisure."

"And where have you left your luggage?" inquired the lawyer.

"At the railway station," answered Lettice. "It was my purpose to ask you to recommend me to a suitable hotel: but since you have been kind enough to insist that I shall take up my temporary abode beneath your roof, I will go and order my effects to be brought hither."

"I cannot think of allowing you to go out again at this late hour," said Mr. Pollard. "The very first thing in the morning I will procure some one to fetch your boxes from the terminus. If you are not cold in this room without a fire, we will sit and chat a little longer; and there will be no harm in my looking at these papers at once: it will save some trouble for the morrow—and then there will be nothing for you to do but sign the releases and receive your money."

Thus speaking, the old man proceeded to open the packet; and putting on his spectacles, he commenced the examination of the documents,—musing audibly as he proceeded.

"The certificate of your birth—aye, to be sure! I remember it well. The certificate of your marriage—and also this French paper containing the proof of your poor husband's death. I am glad you brought it, as it is to a certain extent necessary. Ah! these, I see, are several letters of mine to you, merely on business-matters. And here is your French passport: hair, brown—eyes, blue—stature, tall—the least thing stout—and so on. Very good! We will now put up these papers again; and you can keep them. If I have looked over them, it was as a mere matter of form—and nothing else."

"Of course, my dear sir," answered Lettice, infinitely relieved when this new ordeal was over, "you are bound to conduct the affair in a business-like way. And now, with your permission, I will retire to rest: for I feel much fatigued."

Mr. Pollard rang the bell; and the summons was immediately answered by Mrs. Webber, who had not long re-entered the house after her meeting with Barney the Burker. She was totally unaware that any one had been admitted during her temporary absence; and she was therefore smitten with astonishment on finding her master seated with a lady. As a matter of course she at once concluded that this must be Mrs. Rayner; and quickly recovering her self-possession, she assumed an air of placid benignity, as if pleased that the long-expected one should have come at last.

"This is Mrs. Rayner," said the old miser to his housekeeper; "and thus by her presence are all apprehensions for her safety set at rest. Have the goodness to conduct Mrs. Rayner to the chamber prepared for her reception. Good night, Louisa."

"Good night, my dear sir," answered Lettice: and she then followed Mrs. Webber from the room.

A few minutes afterwards the housekeeper returned to the parlour, to make the usual inquiry as to whether her master needed anything more ere she retired for the night; and the response being in the negative, she withdrew.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE STRONG ROOM.

It was now close upon ten o'clock; and the old miser proceeded to the strong room,—which, as the reader will recollect, also served him as a bed-chamber. He had to part on the following day with the sum of three thousand pounds; and though it was not his own money, yet there was something gratifying in the possession of it. He loved to feast his eyes on masses of shining gold—that gold which was the idol of his egotistic worship! On the very day that Mrs. Rayner attained her majority, he had drawn the sum of three thousand pounds from his banker, and had deposited it in his iron safe. A large portion was in the yellow specie: the remainder in bank-notes. The old man now sat down at the table to count over those notes and that gold from which he was to part on the morrow. He experienced a feeling very closely bordering upon affliction at the prospect of having to separate himself from so large a sum: but yet not for a moment did he entertain the thought of self-appropriating it—nor did he regret having honourably performed the duties of guardianship in respect to that money and its rightful owner, whom he now supposed to be beneath his roof. But he sat down to count it, not merely to convince himself, for the tenth time since he had it in his possession, that it was correct—but likewise to have the gratification of fingering and contemplating it for the last time but one. We say *but one*, because the old man naturally expected that on the morrow he would have to count the money again when handing it over to its claimant—and *then* indeed for the last time!

Meanwhile Mrs. Webber had ascended to her own chamber, making her footsteps sound with unusual heaviness upon the stairs, and slamming the door of the room with a certain degree of violence—and all for the purpose of making the supposed Mrs. Rayner hear that she had thus sought her own apartment. There the treacherous housekeeper sat down for about a quarter of an hour,—retaining in her hand an old-fashioned silver watch which she possessed, and keeping her eyes fixed upon the dial. If we were to follow the train of her musings we should find that she was exceedingly well acquainted with the habits of her master, although she had been so short a time in his service: but then she had entered this service for a special object, and she had failed not to watch all his proceedings and acquire as deep an insight as possible into his habits and customs.

"He will sit down in his room for a good half-hour," she said to herself, "to look over his books, enter the transactions of the day, and sum up his profits before he barricades himself in for the night. At a quarter past ten precisely I am to give admission to Barney and Bill Scott: there will then be a good quarter of an hour to do the work. Yes—and it shall be done too, no matter this Mrs. Rayner's presence—it shall be done at any risk!"

While thus musing, Mrs. Webber continued to regard the minute-hand of her watch; and just as it marked twelve minutes past ten, she took off her shoes, opened the door very gently, and noiselessly

crept down the staircase. Not a board creaked under her footsteps; and she was careful to prevent the rustling of her dress as she passed by Lettice Rodney's door. She carried no light in her hand; and thus, silent as a ghost—stealthy and mysterious as an evil spirit—in the deep darkness did she continue her way. She gained the ground-floor—she peeped through the keyhole of the strong room—and thence she proceeded to the kitchen. Cautiously opening the back door, she put on her shoes again and issued into the yard. The back gate was speedily unfastened—and two persons, who were lurking in readiness there, passed into the premises. These were Barnes and his delectable acolyte Bill Scott. Mrs. Webber led them into the kitchen; and there she struck a light,—placing her finger upon her lips the moment the glare of the lucifer flashed upon the previous darkness.

"Hush!" she said in the lowest whisper: "we must be cautious—the lady is come."

"But has the old 'un paid her over the blunt?" inquired Barney with a look of apprehension.

"No—I am certain he has not," responded Mrs. Webber; "there are deeds to sign first of all—or rather it was intended there should be," she added, with a glance of diabolical significancy.

"Ah! but they won't be, though," rejoined Barney the Burker, his own looks full of a still more hideous and terrible meaning. "I say, by the bye, when I think of it—did I understand you just now, marm, that you mean to cut away from the house directly the business is done?"

"To be sure," answered Mrs. Webber,—"when the swag is properly divided. But of course we shall all three go different ways—and you may depend upon it that though an old woman, I shall keep on the tramp the whole night, and then get up to London to-morrow in the best way that I can."

"But there'll be a terrible hue and cry," remarked the Burker, "and it won't do for you to think of laying concealed at Jack Smedley's house ——you'll be sure to get nabbed."

"And I don't mean anything of the sort," answered the vile woman: "I shall get over to France, and never come back to England again. But we must not stand gossiping here: we must get to work."

"Here's the tools," said the Burker, with a grin, as he produced a long dagger from one pocket and a pistol from the other—while Bill Scott also displayed a couple of pistols. "But this is the thing that we must do the business with," added Barney, as he restored the pistol to his pocket and felt the point of the dirk with his forefinger.

"Come," said Mrs. Webber; "and mind if Mrs. Rayner up-stairs happens to overhear a noise—if there is any struggling on the old man's part, and she gets alarmed and comes down or cries out——"

"Then we must do *her* business also," interrupted the Burker, with a ferocious look.

Mrs. Webber nodded with approving significancy; and as a thought struck her, she said, "As I came down stairs, I peeped through the keyhole and saw the old man sitting with his back to the door. If we should be lucky enough to find him in the same position now, the work will be easy enough; for he is too deaf to hear the door opening or to catch the sound of your footsteps. But you had better both of you take off your shoes."

This counsel was at once followed by the Burker and Bill Scott; and Mrs. Webber, with the light in her hand, now led the way from the kitchen. On reaching the passage where the door of the strong room was, she deposited the candle upon a step of the staircase, and then peeped through the keyhole. As her countenance was again turned towards her two villanous accomplices, its expression of fiendish satisfaction made them aware that circumstances continued favourable to their murderous project.

Mrs. Webber now proceeded to raise the latch of the door as noiselessly as she possibly could; and as she gently opened it, Barney and Bill Scott beheld the old man seated with his back towards them. He had on his dressing-gown, and was placed in an arm-chair at the head of the table. A single candle lighted the scene within the room: its beams were reflected by the yellow gold which the miser was counting. A couple of bags were likewise in front of him—as well as an open account-book, which showed the precise state of Mrs. Rayner's affairs, calculated and balanced to the minutest fraction. So absorbed was Anthony Pollard in his task, that even if he had been less deaf than he was, he would perhaps have still failed to hear the opening door or the tread of the murderers' steps—shoeless and stealthy—that were approaching from behind.

Barney the Burker advanced first, with his long sharp dagger in his hand: Bill Scott was immediately behind him, grasping a pistol to be used in case of emergency. Mrs. Webber remained at the door,—behind which she half concealed herself; for though iniquitous enough to play her part in the cold-blooded deed, she nevertheless instinctively recoiled from its too near contemplation. Stealthily advanced the Burker towards the unsuspecting old miser; and when at the back of his chair, the villain's dagger was raised to deal the murderous blow. At that very instant Mrs. Webber gave a start; and the word "Hush!" being almost involuntarily uttered, sounded audibly from her lips. Bill Scott, instantaneously catching it, laid his hand upon the Burker's shoulder to make him aware that there was something wrong, at the same time that he glanced back towards Mrs. Webber. But it was too late!—the diabolic galvanic force was already in the Burker's arm—the weapon was descending with a terrific power—deep down did it plunge between the shoulders of the unfortunate old man—a groan burst from his lips—and he fell forward a corpse, with his head upon the table.

"It was nothing, after all," said Mrs. Webber, the instant the blow was dealt. "I thought I heard some one moving about up-stairs."

But here we must interrupt the thread of our narrative for a brief space, to return to Lettice Rodney. It will be remembered that when Mrs. Webber was summoned to the parlour in order to conduct Lettice to her chamber, she was seized with astonishment on finding that her master was not alone, and that the lady whom she took to be Mrs. Rayner, had been admitted during her temporary absence from the house. That look

had troubled Lettice: her guilty conscience instantaneously suggested a cause of apprehension. Perhaps this old housekeeper had been for years in Mr. Pollard's service—perhaps she had known the veritable Louisa—and perhaps she was now stricken with astonishment on beholding in the supposed Mrs. Rayner a person so different from what she had expected to see, and from what the little Louisa was likely to have grown up into? Such were the reflections which swept all in a moment through Lettice Rodney's mind; and a cold terror thrilled through her form. She had nevertheless a sufficiency of self-possession still remaining to avoid the betrayal of what she felt; and she followed Mrs. Webber to the bed-room prepared for her reception. Mrs. Webber was considerably disconcerted by the arrival of the supposed Mrs. Rayner, and was apprehensive lest the murderous plot could not now be carried out. A portion of what she felt was reflected in her looks; and Lettice, being herself keenly and poignantly on the watch, saw that there was something strange and peculiar in the way that the housekeeper surveyed her. Still interpreting matters according to her own alarms, her former suspicion seemed to be strengthened: namely, that Mrs. Webber had a misgiving in respect to her identity with Mrs. Rayner. She longed to lead the old woman into conversation, to ascertain if her fears were really well founded: but the words she would have spoken appeared to stick in her throat, and she could not give utterance to a single syllable.

"Is there anything you require, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Webber, with a certain constraint, in consequence of what was passing in her own mind.

"Nothing," replied Lettice, her tongue now unloosening; and then she muttered a faint "Good night," which Mrs. Webber did not catch, and therefore did not respond to—but quitted the room with the impression that the lady was a proud, haughty, and reserved being who did not choose to enter into any discourse with her.

That constraint with which the housekeeper had spoken, and which, as the reader has seen, in reality arose from the state of her own guilty feelings,—was, under a similar influence, interpreted by Lettice into a studied coolness on the old woman's part; so that when Mrs. Webber had retired, Lettice flung herself upon a chair in an awful dismay, murmuring, "I am suspected—I shall be discovered—this woman is evidently more than half convinced that I am an impostress! At all events she will give some hint to her master to put him upon his guard: he will question me more closely than he otherwise would have done—he will purposely speak to me of things concerning which I cannot possibly give an answer——I shall be detected—exposed—sent to prison—tried—transported—or perhaps hanged!"—for the young woman knew not very well which offences were capital or which were not; and her own terrors naturally made her see everything in the worst light.

She wrung her hands in despair: she bitterly repented of the course into which temptation had led her; and whereas until the last few minutes she had conceived her position to be entirely safe, she now felt astounded at what she looked upon as her egregious folly in having embarked in such an enterprise. She would have given worlds, had she possessed them, to be safe out of the house: a mortal terror was upon her: at one moment she shivered with a cold sensation—the next instant she felt as if her veins were on fire. But still recurred the question—what was she to do? To carry on the imposture now, appeared hopelessness itself—utter madness. While she sat in these painful meditations, she heard Mrs. Webber come stamping up the stairs, and then loudly closing the door of her room. The reader knows very well for what purpose this noise was made: but the conscience-troubled Lettice interpreted it through the medium of her own fears.

"The woman has been down," she said to herself, with anguish at the heart, "to tell her master that he is deceived; and she cannot conceal her own rage at the idea that there is an impostress in the house. Hence this stamping of the feet—hence this slamming of her door! Oh, what will become of me?"

Again the miserable Lettice wrung her hands despairingly,—when all in a moment the thought struck her that she might escape out of the house. Yes—if this were practicable, she would accomplish it! But what if the street-door were locked and the key taken out? Ah! then doubtless there would be some means of issue from the back part of the premises—or by the parlour-window——anything, so long as she could escape! And now, how thankful she was that her effects had been left at the railway-terminus: for perhaps there might be a very late train by which she could get off—or at all events there was sure to be a very early one in the morning—and she might be far away from Liverpool before her flight from the house should be discovered.

Having reflected upon all these things, Lettice Rodney determined to make her escape. She had not taken off her bonnet or shawl: she was therefore in readiness to depart without delay. But she thought to herself that it would be better to wait half-an-hour, and thus afford leisure to the other inmates of the dwelling (for she did not even know how many there might be, nor what number of servants the old miser kept) to sink into repose in their respective chambers. She waited accordingly; and it was a half-hour of painful suspense for her, because she was not as yet certain that she would after all be enabled to find an issue from the dwelling. She did not hear Mrs. Webber descend the stairs; and as the house appeared to continue quiet, she at length resolved to put her project into execution. Opening the door of her chamber, she stole forth: but on reaching the head of the staircase, she perceived a light glimmering below; and hastily retreating, closed the door again, more loudly than was consistent with caution. It was this sound which had reached Mrs. Webber's ears, and made her ejaculate "Hush!" just at the very instant that Barney the Burker was about to drive his dagger deep down between the shoulders of the victim. And it may be added that it was the candle which Mrs. Webber had placed upon the stairs, that had so terrified Lettice Rodney.

The murder was accomplished, as we have already described; and scarcely was the blow dealt, when the vile old housekeeper intimated to the two assassins that she had been disturbed by a false alarm.

"What was it you thought as how you heerd?" inquired the Burker.

"A door shutting up-stairs," answered Mrs. Webber.

"Then what if that lady as you spoke of, has been a-listening and heerd summut—and perhaps she don't dare come down, but will open her winder and speak to any one as goes by; so that in a few minutes the place'll be surrounded, the whole neighbourhood alarmed, and we have no more chance of getting clear off than a cat without claws in a partickler place."

Mrs. Webber's countenance grew full of dismay as she listened to this rapidly uttered speech on the Burker's part, and the tenour of which appeared indeed but too reasonable.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Bill Scott.

"By jingo! we must do for her also," ejaculated Barney, with a look of fiercest resolve. "Come, lead the way, old dame—and we'll look to the swag arterwards: *he* won't run off with it," added the ruffian with a look of horrible significancy towards the old miser's corpse, which was bending with its face down upon the table.

Meanwhile Lettice Rodney was a prey to the most terrible apprehensions,—her guilty conscience suggesting all kinds of alarms. She thought that the reason why there was a light still burning below, was because the officers of justice had been sent for and were waiting to take her into custody. There was madness in her brain: she flew to the window of her room with the idea of opening it and precipitating herself into the street: but no! she could not die thus horribly—or if she survived, find herself frightfully mutilated. Ah! all in a moment an idea struck her. What if she were to hasten down stairs—throw herself at the miser's feet—confess the trick—but beseech him to pardon her—and in return for his forgiveness she would give him such information as would enable him to keep the three thousand pounds for himself. She could tell him that his ward Mrs. Rayner was no more, and that she had perished in a manner which would prevent her heirs—if she had any by her own or her husband's side—from becoming acquainted with her death.

Swift as lightning did these ideas sweep through the brain of Lettice Rodney: but ere she descended to put her project into execution, she opened the door and listened. Ah! she heard voices talking below: they were indeed those of the wretches who were at the instant deciding upon the murder of herself: but she could not catch what they said—and she fancied that the officers of justice were perhaps already in the house. Oh! then she must beseech and implore a private interview with Mr. Pollard: it seemed to her the only method to save herself from destruction. Goaded well nigh to madness, the wretched young woman rushed down the stairs; and as, on reaching the lower flight, she beheld Mrs. Webber accompanied by two ill-looking fellows, her very worst fears seemed to be confirmed, and in her eyes the Burker and Bill Scott instantaneously took the aspect of constables.

"Spare—Oh! spare me!" she cried, frantically clasping her hands as she stopped short midway on the staircase: "I will confess everything! Oh, I know that I have been very guilty—but the temptation was so great! Let me see Mr. Pollard—and I will tell him something that shall induce him to forgive me!"

The reader may imagine how great was the astonishment of Mrs. Webber and her iniquitous accomplices on hearing these passionately vehement ejaculations from Lettice Rodney's lips. While on the one hand utterly at a loss to comprehend her, they nevertheless on the other hand heard enough to make them aware that she was completely unsuspicious of the crime which they had committed, and that she believed Pollard to be still in the land of the living, inasmuch as she was beseeching an interview with him. The three wretches exchanged bewildered looks with each other; and Lettice fancied that they were uncertain whether to grant her own prayer or to carry her off to gaol at once.

"Spare me—for heaven's sake spare me!" she exclaimed, descending the stairs; "and I will confess how I was led into this imposture!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, to whom these words were a revelation: "then, who are you?"

"My name is Lettice Rodney," replied the young woman: "I met Mrs. Rayner——"

"And you are *not* Mrs. Rayner?" said the housekeeper, in hurried inquiry.

"No—and *you* all along knew that I was not. Oh, there is Mr. Pollard——Gracious heavens!" screamed Lettice, as her eyes were riveted upon the dagger which still remained between his shoulders; and smitten with the horrible—the overwhelming conviction that murder had been done, she fell down senseless at the foot of the staircase.

"There let her be—we'll divide the swag and bolt," said the Burker; "it isn't worth while to do her a mischief any-how."

"Stop!" said Mrs. Webber, as an idea of devilish ingenuity flashed in unto her mind: "we may save ourselves from all danger—and I need not scamper out of the country over to France."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Burker and Bill Scott, as if both speaking in the same breath.

"Never do you mind," responded Mrs. Webber: "leave it all to me—I know what I am about. Take charge of the swag, Barney—I know I can trust you for my share—you'll get up to London as quick as you can, and you'll give it to my daughter Bab—but not to Jack, mind! not to Jack."

"All right, marm," responded the Burker. "Come along, Bill—and let's be off."

The three wretches—satisfied that Lettice Rodney was in a profound swoon, from which she would not very readily awaken—returned into the strong room; and the two men took possession of all the gold and bank-notes, with the exception of fifty sovereigns which Mrs. Webber desired them to leave as a means of enabling her to carry out the objects which she had in view. Barney and Bill Scott then took their departure by the same way in which they had entered,—Mrs. Webber carefully closing and securing the yard-gate as well as the back-door when they were gone. On re-entering the house, she found Lettice still lying insensible at the foot of the stairs: she approached the corpse of her master—took his purse from his pocket—put into that

purse the fifty sovereigns which she had kept back—and then, while Lettice still continued in a state of unconsciousness, deposited the purse in the young woman's pocket.

This being done, Mrs. Webber opened the front door of the house and began screaming out, "Murder! help!" with all her might and main. The alarm spread like wildfire along the street—several persons rushed in—and as Lettice Rodney was startled back to life by the woman's cries, she found herself the object of execration and abhorrence on the part of a dozen individuals surrounding her—— she was accused of murder!

No pen can describe the confusion, the horror, and the dismay which now prevailed in the miser's house. The neighbours were flocking in; and the spectacle of the corpse, bent motionless over the table, with the weapon sticking in the back, produced a fearful sensation.

"Murder!" cried Lettice, flinging around her wild and almost frenzied looks: "*I* commit murder! No, no—that abominable woman"—pointing to Mrs. Webber—"and the two villains who were with her——"

"Wretch!" exclaimed the housekeeper; "you know that you killed the poor old gentleman because he found out that you were a cheat—and you fell into a fit when, alarmed by the noise, I came down and discovered the dreadful deed."

Lettice was overwhelmed with the accusation: she strove to speak, but she could not—a faintness came over her—and she would have again fallen, had she not been supported by the arms of two police constables who now took her into custody. In this piteous condition, bordering upon unconsciousness, she was borne away to the station-house, followed by a concourse of persons, all under the influence of dread horror at the deed which had been committed, as well as of amazement that one so young, so beautiful, and so genteel-looking should have committed such a stupendous crime.

On reaching the station-house, Mrs. Webber preferred the charge—but was continuously interrupted by the passionate, frenzied, and vehement ejaculations of Lettice Rodney. The latter was searched; and the purse, containing the fifty pounds, was found upon her. This was proclaimed to be the old miser's purse, not merely by Mrs. Webber, but by the butcher, the baker, the grocer, and other tradesmen, with whom the deceased had been accustomed to deal, and who were now present while the charge was being preferred. As a matter of course no one believed the unfortunate Lettice Rodney's vehement averment of innocence and counter-accusation in respect to Mrs. Webber: she was consigned to a cell, where she passed the remainder of the night in a condition of mind bordering upon utter distraction.

In the morning Lettice Rodney was placed before the magistrate, charged with the murder of Anthony Pollard. Meanwhile her boxes had been taken possession of at the railway-station by the police; and some letters were therein found, proving that her name was Lettice Rodney. On her own person not merely the murdered man's purse was discovered, but also the packet of papers belonging to Mrs. Rayner. The evidence given by Mrs. Webber before the magistrate was to the following effect:—

"The late Mr. Pollard was guardian to a lady named Louisa Rayner, whom he had not however seen for many years. This lady recently attained her majority, and was expected by Mr. Pollard to pay him a visit and receive the funds that were due to her. Last evening the prisoner came to the house, announcing herself to be Mrs. Rayner; and she was at first believed to be what she thus represented herself. She had a long interview with my poor master; and about ten o'clock I went up to bed, leaving them together in the room where Mr. Pollard habitually sat. I did not immediately retire to rest, having needlework to do. Upwards of half-an-hour elapsed, when I heard the sounds of voices speaking very loud. I opened my door, and listened. My ears distinctly caught my master's voice bitterly upbraiding the prisoner as an impostress, and insisting upon knowing how she came to personate Mrs. Rayner, and how she got possession of her papers. There was a great deal of this language on my master's side, and much intercession on that of the prisoner. I heard Mr. Pollard threaten to give her into custody; and then the door of the room, which was previously open, was closed. I presumed it was for fear of alarming me; and I thought to myself that Mr. Pollard meant to forgive her if she would confess everything. Presently it struck me that I heard a cry—or rather a deep moan;—then the door was opened again—and feeling a certain degree of uneasiness, I hastened down stairs. The prisoner was in the passage: she looked dreadfully confused on beholding me—and as I glanced in at the door, I was filled with horror and dismay on beholding a dagger sticking in my master's back. I seized upon the prisoner, calling her a murderess; and she fainted. The dagger belonged to my master: he was afraid of thieves and kept it for his defence. When sitting in that room at night-time, he generally laid it on the table near him: so that I have no doubt the prisoner snatched it up and used it suddenly."

While Mrs. Webber was making this deposition, Lettice Rodney passed through all the extremes of feeling of which the human heart is susceptible,—at one time crushed down by the weight of fearful consternation, at another giving vent to the most passionate declarations of innocence, as well as of accusations against Mrs. Webber herself,—now imploring heaven to interfere in her behalf, then appealing to the justice of man,—now confessing herself to be guilty of the intended cheat, but repudiating with abhorrence the graver and blacker charge,—then bursting forth into a paroxysm of the wildest anguish—and then sinking down into a numbed stupor, until suddenly starting up again in a fresh frenzy of words, looks, and gesticulations.

When asked, with the usual caution, whether Lettice had anything to say in her defence, she spoke with so much incoherence, that it was scarcely possible to unravel her words and obtain therefrom a continuous narrative. The magistrate was however patient; and after much trouble, her story was elicited. She told how she had fallen in with Mrs. Rayner, and explained the circumstances under which she was led to undertake the imposture: she told likewise how she had discovered the murder, and seen Mrs. Webber with the two men;—but no one believed this portion of her tale. The purse had been found upon her·

and then too she had her bonnet and shawl on when captured—which seemed to corroborate Mrs. Webber's account of a protracted interview with the old man: while the unfortunate young woman's own explanation of an intended flight from the house, was regarded merely as an excuse to account for the circumstance of her being thus dressed in all the apparel in which she had first arrived at the dwelling.

The magistrate had but one duty to perform—one course to pursue; and this was to commit Lettice Rodney for trial at the next assizes, on the charge of murdering Anthony Pollard.

CHAPTER XL.

THE DUCAL SECRETARY.

CHRISTIAN ASHTON entered upon his duties as private English secretary to the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha; and a week passed, during which he gave his Royal Highness the utmost satisfaction. In the meantime he had become acquainted with all the noblemen and gentlemen forming the suite of that most illustrious prince; and perhaps the reader may wish to know a little more of these same German worthies.

They were eight in number,—delighting in names as euphonious to pronounce as they were easy to spell; and these shall be enumerated. Firstly, there was Count Wronki, who filled the office of Lord Steward, and whose chief avocation appeared to be in giving as few orders as possible and keeping down the hotel expenses to the utmost of his ability. The reader is already aware that the taciturn Chevalier Gumbinnen occupied the high post of Lord Chamberlain, with which was combined that of principal Lord of the Bedchamber: but if this latter office included the care of the Duke's wardrobe, it was very nearly a sinecure,—for a single portmanteau of small dimensions could without difficulty contain all the coats, waistcoats, and trousers which his Royal Highness possessed; and as for the linen, when there were half-a-dozen shirts in use and half-a-dozen more at the washerwoman's—applying the same estimate also to false collars, handkerchiefs, and stockings—the amount of this great prince's under-garments was not of an extent to require a great deal of supervision. Baron Raggidbak was the Groom of the Stole—the precise duties of which office Christian Ashton was at a loss to comprehend; unless indeed they consisted in the eating and drinking of all that his lordship could by any means get hold of—lounging away his time—reading newspapers—or quarrelling with a comrade over a game of *picquet* for sixpenny stakes. The Chevalier Kadger was the Equerry; and he was in almost constant attendance upon his Royal Highness: but his leisure time was expended in smoking full-flavoured Cubas, and in renewing the odour of garlic and rum which he seemed to make it a rule to carry about with him. Then there was General Himmelspinken, who filled the office of Master of the Horse: but this—at least in England, whatever it might have been in Germany—was an unmistakable sinecure: for the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had not brought over with him so much as a donkey, much less a horse; and one of the Queen's carriages was every day sent from Buckingham Palace to convey his Royal Highness to Court, or out for an airing, or to visit the public buildings, and so forth. Baron Farthenless held the office of Privy Purse; and Christian could not help thinking that the name of this functionary was most unfortunately ominous in respect to the state of the ducal exchequer. One thing he noticed—which was that Baron Farthenless took immense care of the Duke's plate,—only giving it out when his Royal Highness dined at the hotel, but never opening the chest for its display on the dinner-table of the ducal suite when his Royal Highness banqueted at the palace or elsewhere. Another high official was Herr Humbogh—whose name was pronounced just like that word which Englishmen are accustomed to ejaculate when expressing a derisive incredulity of anything which they hear, or when denouncing an imposture, a quackery, or a cheat. This gentleman was denominated the Privy Seal: his duties were light and pleasant, as well as easily performed, and with but little responsibility,—being limited indeed to the careful keeping of an old brass seal on which the ducal arms were emblazoned, and the value of which as a piece of metal might be about three-halfpence. The mention of Count Frumpenhausen will complete this aristocratic category,—his lordship bearing the title of Gold Stick, and his duty being to carry a brass-headed cane on those occasions when his ducal master was graciously pleased to grant an audience to English noblemen and gentlemen who called to pay their respects to the reigning Sovereign of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha.

But though any one of such English noblemen and gentlemen could, without much inconvenience to his own finances, have drawn a cheque upon his banker for an amount that would have purchased all the personal property possessed by the Duke and his entire suite,—yet such is the servile, grovelling, lickspittle character of the higher and middle orders of the English, that the profoundest respect was paid by all visitors to this trumpery Duke and the beggarly, half-starved horde of rapacious Germans that he had brought over with him. It was however sufficient that he was nearly related to Prince Albert—that he bore a ducal title—and that he was an independent Sovereign (in the pay of Russia and Austria)—it was sufficient, we say, that he was all this to ensure for him the reverential devotion of those scions of the British aristocracy and gentry who flocked to Mivart's to pay their court.

When the week had expired, and Christian was about to take his departure at five o'clock—his usual hour—he looked about for Baron Farthenless, to whom he was directed to apply for his salary. He could not however find the Privy Purse in any one of the suite of rooms occupied by his Royal Highness and his retinue: but in the ante-chamber he found all the other noblemen and gentlemen of the ducal household assembled together. It immediately struck Christian that these also were waiting for the Privy Purse, in order to receive such moneys as might be due to them; and yet, on a second thought, he repudiated the idea as something too preposterous, that such high and mighty functionaries could possibly receive weekly salaries.

THE HON. WILSON STANHOPE.

He did not want his own money, as he had plenty of funds at his disposal: but the warning given him by the friendly-disposed waiter had rendered him determined to look after that which was his due; for he thought it by no means improbable that Baron Farthenless might endeavour to cheat him out of it—an opinion to which he was more or less justified in arriving, inasmuch as during the week he had seen but too many instances of the dirty meanness and paltry expedients to which the members of the ducal retinue had recourse for obtaining wines, cigars, spirits, and other things beyond the limit of their actual allowances.

"What for you sall be waiting, yong mans?" inquired Baron Raggidbak, taking our hero aside and speaking to him in a confidential whisper.

"I am waiting to see Baron Farthenless," answered Christian. "Does your lordship shortly expect him?"

"Yes — I suspects him in one — two — tree minute. He am gone for to go to de palace to see de Prince; and he come back vare soon wid de moneys."

"Gone to the palace to get money of the Prince?" ejaculated Christian, thus giving involuntary utterance to his amazement.

"Yes, begar!" responded Raggidbak. "De vare goot Prince Albert sall act as——how you call it?——Oh! de banker of de Duke all de times we sall be in England. I waiting too for de moneys. I vare rich man in mine own country—vare rich: but me forgot to bring over wid me de tousand pounds which I was meant for to do. Have you got such a ting, yong mans, as six shilling in your pocket?—and we sall drink one bottle of de wine till de Baron sall come back."

Christian was determined not to be mulcted a second time by Baron Raggidbak; and so he gave an evasive response,—whereat his lordship looked deeply indignant and turned haughtily away, playing with his gilt brass watch-chain.

Almost immediately afterwards Baron Farthenless made his appearance; and then Christian was surprised to see how the noblemen and gentlemen of the ducal retinue crowded around the Privy Purse,—surveying him with looks of eager inquiry, and ready to stretch forth their dirty hands with hungry avidity to clutch whatsoever spoil he had to place at their disposal. And spoil it really was,—spoil wrung from the overtaxed industry of the working classes, and which, though by Act of Parliament passing through the hands of a naturalized foreign Prince, was thus destined to find its way into the pockets of these German cormorants whom the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had brought over with him. Christian was infinitely disgusted; and as soon as he had received his own salary, he took his departure.

We must now observe that during the week which had thus elapsed since he entered into the service of the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, he had every day seen the beautiful Isabella Vincent—but only for a few minutes at a time; and on no occasion to enter into discourse with her, save in the presence of Mr. or Mrs. Chubb. His interest in the charming girl could scarcely be said to have increased—for it had already reached the point at which it had become the purest and sincerest love. But he saw that some mystery enveloped her; and he was curious to fathom it.

On returning to his lodging, between five and six o'clock in the evening, after receiving his salary from Baron Farthenless, he found a well-dressed but by no means agreeable-looking man knocking at the door of Mr. Chubb's house. The summons was not immediately answered; and Christian accordingly waited on the steps with this individual,—who surveyed him, as he thought, in a rather suspicious manner. He was a person of about forty years of age—by no means good-looking—clothed in black—and exhibiting great neatness and carefulness of toilet. Presently the door opened; and the servant-girl, evidently recognising the visitor, conducted him into the parlour—while Christian repaired to his own room.

About half-an-hour afterwards, Mrs. Chubb made her appearance before her youthful lodger; and he at once saw by her countenance that something had troubled her. This countenance of her's was never the sweetest in its expression; and therefore when anything did transpire to put her out, it was vixenish and disagreeable to a degree.

"I am come, Mr. Ashton," she said, "to beg that you will suit yourself with other apartments as soon as possible—this very evening, if so be you can; and in course, if you insist upon it, I sha'n't claim the week's rent which is due, because I am not giving you a week's notice."

"But what is the meaning of this?" inquired Christian, perfectly astonished as well as hurt by the suddenness of the proceeding.

"Never mind, sir! I have got no explanations to give—leastways there is no call to have any words about it: but as a gentleman I trust you will do me this faviour at once."

"Mrs. Chubb," answered Christian, half indignant and half remonstrating, "it is impossible you can treat me in such a manner without explaining your conduct. If my own behaviour has been improper or discourteous to yourself or any one beneath your roof——"

"Well, sir," interrupted Mrs. Chubb, softening somewhat, "there's no fault to find with your conduct: you're a gentleman; and you behaved as sich. But I do beg this faviour at your hands; and, in course, if in taking another lodging you refer to me I shall say all that's good and proper. Pray don't press me any farther, there's a dear young gentleman: but see about moving at once."

"It is totally impossible that I can find another lodging this evening," answered Christian, cruelly annoyed and perplexed: "but after the way in which you have just spoken to me, I certainly feel myself bound to leave to-morrow."

"Well, sir, I must make that do," responded Mrs. Chubb; "and thank'ee kindly."

Thereupon she quitted the room; and Christian was left to deliberate upon all that had occurred. Was it on Isabella's account that he had received this notice?—was that man whom he had encountered at the street door, in any way connected with her? He hoped not: for there was something in the look of that individual which he by no means liked—a certain sinister expression which appeared to indicate hypocrisy, cunning, and other debasing sentiments. He now longed

to obtain a few minutes' private discourse with Isabella. The thought of separating from her had led him to the sudden comprehension of the feeling which he entertained on her behalf: he saw that it was not a mere friendly interest: a secret voice, whispering in his soul, told him that it was love. But how obtain a private interview with Isabella?—and even if he succeeded, what did he purpose to say? He knew not; and yet he felt how impossible it was for him to go elsewhere without exchanging another syllable with that beauteous creature. He sat with his door ajar, in the hope that he might hear her issue forth from the front parlour,—in which case he would go and meet her in the passage at any risk. But no: the opportunity served not—the time passed—and at ten o'clock he heard Miss Vincent ascending to her own chamber, Mrs. Chubb closely following.

Christian passed an almost sleepless night: he rose early in the morning—and at nine o'clock was compelled to sally forth and search for another lodging before he proceeded to Mivart's Hotel to enter upon his day's duties. He was not long in finding suitable apartments: he gave a reference to Mrs. Chubb, and intimated that he should take possession of the rooms in the evening. Then, with a heavy heart, he repaired to the hotel; but during the hours that he was engaged in his avocations, he was abstracted, and performed them only in a sort of mechanical manner.

At five he retraced his way to Mr. Chubb's, wondering whether he should be enabled to obtain a few minutes' interview with Isabella,—in which case he was more than half resolved to throw himself at her feet and avow his love: for it had now assumed all the pure passion and chaste fervour of romance. But as he entered the street, he beheld a carriage, with livery servants in attendance, standing at the door of the parish clerk's house: a man came out, leading Isabella by the hand—and that man was the same with the sinister countenance, whom Christian had seen on the preceding day. He assisted Isabella to enter the carriage,—he himself immediately afterwards ascending to the box, and taking his seat as a menial or dependant by the side of the fat, gorgeously liveried, powdered coachman. The equipage drove away in the contrary direction from that whence Christian was advancing; and he stopped short, smitten with grief, as well as with a bewilderment amounting almost to dismay. Isabella was gone: she had not observed him—or if she did notice his presence in the street, she had not dared bestow even a parting look upon him:—she was gone, and she was borne away under circumstances which only added to the mystery already enveloping her. She had taken her departure in a splendid equipage; and the man who had come to fetch her, was evidently a menial. If Christian's soul were susceptible of any consolation under this infliction, it was to be found in the fact that his mind was relieved from the apprehension that the sinister-looking individual was in any way connected by the bonds of kinship with the beautiful Isabella.

For nearly a minute did the youth stand in the street, a dozen yards distant from the spot where the carriage had just driven off: he felt as if a dreadful calamity had suddenly overtaken him—as if a gulf had abruptly opened, separating him from the object of his love. At length he moved slowly onward to the parish-clerk's house: Mrs. Chubb herself answered his summons at the front-door, and begged him to step into the parlour.

"Well, Mr. Ashton," she exclaimed, "here's a pretty business! I've lost the young lady and the guinea a week that was paid for her board and lodging—and all through you!"

"Through me?" ejaculated our young hero: but his cheeks became the colour of scarlet—for he felt as if the keen eyes of the landlady were penetrating to the inmost recesses of his heart.

"Yes, to be sure—through you, Mr. Ashton!" she repeated: "leastways, on your account. I hadn't ought to have took you unbeknown to that there Mr. Gibson."

"And who is Mr. Gibson?" inquired Christian, who now thought he might possibly hear something in respect to the mystery which had appeared to envelope the object of his love.

"Why, Mr. Gibson is the person who put Miss Vincent with me and paid for her board and lodging."

"And how long had Miss Vincent been with you?"

"Not more than three months, or so," rejoined Mrs. Chubb; "and it is wery wexing that she should have gone like this. But who on earth she can be, I haven't no more idea than the man in the moon!"

"But it surely was not this Mr. Gibson's own carriage?"

"In course not!—or else he wouldn't have got upon the box. To think that Miss Vincent, who lived here for a guinea a week, should have had a carriage sent to fetch her away——"

"And where is she going to?" interrupted Christian, his heart palpitating with suspense as he awaited the reply.

"Ah! that's quite unbeknown to me," responded Mrs. Chubb. "Mr. Gibson was always precious close; and Miss Vincent herself never said a word about any relations or friends that she might have. But I always thought that there was some little mystery about the young lady. She lived for a long time with Mr. Hickman—our clergyman that was; and when he died it was through his widow's recommendation that Mr. Gibson put Miss Vincent with us—Chubb, you see, being parish-clerk."

"And how long did Miss Vincent live in the clergyman's family?" asked Christian.

"Very nigh two year," rejoined Mrs. Chubb. "She was fourteen years old when she was first put in Mr. Hickman's family. She was in deep mourning—for her mother had just died; and I did hear it whispered that she was a lady of title—but I don't know how true it may be, for Miss Vincent never spoke to me about her family. And to tell you the truth, when Mr. Gibson put her here, he hinted that she was somewhat peculiarly sitiwated, and that me and Chubb was never to bother her with no questions."

"Then it would appear that this Mr. Gibson was only the agent for some one else?" remarked Christian: "and this some one else is evidently the person, whether gentleman or lady, to whom the carriage itself belongs. But what did you mean," he hesitatingly inquired, "by saying that it was through me you have lost her?"—and as Christian put the question, he felt a sad, sad tightening at the heart.

"Why, when Mr. Gibson came yesterday and saw you walk into the house, he asked me who you was; and I was obleeged to tell him that you was a lodger. He looked uncommon glum, and said that he thought as how he had put Miss Vincent into a house where there was no single men to talk nonsense to her and so on. So I told him that you was a very respectable and well-behaved young gentleman—that you was out nearly the whole day, and never saw Miss Vincent unless it was when happening to pass her in the passage or on the stairs. But still he wasn't satisfied; so then I said as how I know'd you was an obleeging young gentleman, and would leave at the shortest possible notice. Mr. Gibson looked better pleased, and went away; and then I thought it was all right. But, lo and behold! just as the clock strikes five this evening, up dashes the carriage to the door—in comes Mr. Gibson, and says that Miss Vincent is to go away with him directly. Her things was soon packed up; and off she went, only just a minute or two before you knocked at the door. So you see that Miss Vincent has got some good friends; or else she has had a sudden windfall and turned out to be a fine lady after all."

"And did she seem pleased," inquired Christian, "with the idea of going away?"

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated Mrs. Chubb. "When Mr. Gibson had her fetched down—for she was up in her own room when he came—and told her she was to go away with him at once, she seemed struck all of a heap."

"Ah! she seemed vexed?" ejaculated Christian, eagerly.

"That she did," exclaimed Mrs. Chubb, not observing his excitement. "And I know what it was: she was sad at the thought of parting from me. You see, I was always very kind and good to her, though it was but a guinea a week as was paid for her keep. And now, Mr. Ashton, there's no longer any call for you to shift your lodgings; and as it's through you I've lost Miss Vincent, I hope you won't think of leaving me."

But Christian made her no answer—for the simple reason that he was not listening to the latter portion of her speech. His heart at the moment was a strange compound of joy and sorrow,—sorrow at the departure of the beauteous Isabella, and joy at the intelligence that she was sad when she left; for he knew full well that it could not be on account of separating from the parish clerk's wife, and a secret voice whispered in his soul that this sadness on Isabella's part was on account of himself. Youthful love is full of hope, and in imagination it triumphs over all obstacles: its fancy is so expansive that it even achieves impossibilities—levels the loftiest barriers and bridges the widest gulfs—until it beholds itself crowned with success. Such now was the case with Christian Ashton; and feeling assured that he was not altogether indifferent to the lovely Isabella, he clung to the hope that the progress of time and the flow of circumstances might lead them together to the altar.

"Why, what are you thinking about, Mr. Ashton?" exclaimed Mrs. Chubb.

"Thinking about?" ejaculated our hero, thus rudely startled up from a dreamy reverie. "Oh! I was thinking of all you have been telling me about Miss Vincent."

Mrs. Chubb repeated her request with regard to the lodgings; and Christian readily promised to grant it, on condition that she would go and make some befitting excuse for his not completing the bargain which he had half-settled in the morning with the other lodging-house-keeper. This little matter was speedily arranged; and our young hero accordingly kept his quarters at the parish clerk's house. But why did he do this after the unceremonious way in which he had been treated when it was thought expedient to get rid of him? Simply because he wished to remain at the place where Isabella had lived, and where it was possible, he thought, she might happen to call. But which of our readers, whether gentleman or lady, who knows what love is, can fail to penetrate our young hero's motives for tarrying at his present lodgings?

Another week passed away; and Christian, on proceeding, as usual, one morning at ten o'clock to Mivart's Hotel, found the utmost excitement prevailing amongst the ducal retinue: there was to be a grand review in Hyde Park that day, at which his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was to be present, and in honour of whom the military display was to take place. It was necessary that the Duke should be accompanied by his entire retinue; and therefore great preparations were in progress for the occasion. In the various rooms the high functionaries were issuing orders to the servants of the hotel: some of them were inspecting their best apparel (and heaven knows that bad was the best!)—while others were burnishing up their trumpery jewellery with pieces of wash-leather. Christian passed on to the little room in which he was accustomed to sit: but on opening the door, he stopped short in sudden dismay at the astounding spectacle which met his eyes. For there sat Baron Raggidbak, the Groom of the Stole, in his coat, waistcoat, boots, and shirt—but without his breeches: for his lordship was busily engaged in the more notable than dignified task of mending a rent in the seat of those very pantaloons of which he had divested himself!

No wonder that Christian stopped short: but the Baron started up in a towering rage, exclaiming, "Der deyvil! why for, yong mans, you go for to come in widout knocking at de door?"

Christian's only reply was a peal of laughter at the ludicrous figure presented to his view by his lordship Baron Raggidbak, Groom of the Stole to the high and mighty reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. His lordship gnashed his teeth with rage, and endeavoured to slip on his pantaloons with all possible despatch: but in his confusion and haste he thrust his right boot through the half-mended rent—and losing his balance, sprawled upon the floor. Christian now felt concerned on the poor devil's behalf; and not wishing to add to his embarrassment, precipitately retreated, closing the door. He thought of repairing to the ante-chamber and waiting there until Baron Raggidbak should leave the secretary's room free for his use. Again he passed through the midst of the greater portion of the ducal retinue; and on entering the ante-chamber somewhat hastily, he surprised the Chevalier Kadger in the act of putting on his military frock coat,—when, to his renewed amazement, Christian discovered that this high official, the principal

Equerry to the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, wore no shirt! He had on a flannel jacket, which had certainly seen a couple of months' wear without being changed; and it was therefore pretty evident that either the Chevalier Kadger's wardrobe was singularly deficient, or else that he had entirely lost the confidence of his washerwoman.

The Equerry, turning his back towards Christian, made all possible haste to hook his frogged and braided coat, which, as it fastened close up to the chin, effectually concealed that little trifling deficiency in the linen department which had betrayed itself to our young hero's knowledge. At this moment the Chevalier Gumbinnen, Lord Chamberlain and Principal Lord of the Bed-chamber, came rushing into the ante-room,—where he pulled the bell violently. This exalted official in the service of an illustrious master seemed to be in as towering a rage as Baron Raggidbak was a few minutes before, when surprised in his airy condition and thrifty occupation: indeed, so much was the Chevalier Gumbinnen excited, that he did not notice Christian's presence. The furious summons of the bell was almost instantaneously answered by a waiter; and the Chevalier, grasping him by the arm, said, "De breeshes!"

The waiter shook his head in evident inability to comprehend the Chevalier's meaning.

"De breeshes!" repeated this functionary, in the highest state of excitement: and no wonder—for he had just used all the English that he knew, and was totally unable to express himself by another syllable of our vernacular.

The Chevalier Kadger, who had by this time finished buttoning up his coat, came to his friend's assistance: a few words were rapidly exchanged in German; and then the Chevalier Kadger, addressing himself to the waiter, said, "Mine goot mans, de Lord Chamberlain sall come for to ask for de breeshes of his Royal Highness."

Then, as the waiter stared in astonishment, the Chevalier Kadger proceeded to explain, in the best English he could possibly muster to his aid, that the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha's best pantaloons had been sent on the previous day to the tailor to have stripes of gold-lace sewn upon the legs—that the pantaloons aforesaid had not come home—and that his Royal Highness was kept waiting in the cold, in his shirt, for these identical breeches, without which it would be exceedingly inconvenient, not to say impossible, for the illustrious Sovereign to appear at the review. Such was the explanation of his Royal Highness's dilemma; and the waiter promised to send round at once to the tailor's for the missing pantaloons: but Christian observed that the man could scarcely repress a smile—while our hero himself had still more difficulty in keeping down an outburst of laughter.

Thinking that by this time Baron Raggidbak might have finished mending his own breeches, and that the secretary's room would be now disengaged, Christian was proceeding thither, when his attention was drawn to the explosion of a sudden altercation between General Himmelspinken and Count Frumpenhausen. The latter nobleman—who, be it remembered, was Gold Stick in Waiting—had fashioned for himself a very fine plumage with the feathers of a cock pheasant's tail; and he was just on the point of fastening his plume to the side of his hat with a brass brooch such as can be purchased in the Lowther Arcade for eighteenpence,—when General Himmelspinken snatched the plume away. Doubtless, as a military officer of high rank, and holding the eminent position of Master of the Horse, his Excellency the General conceived that he himself was the most fitting and proper person to wear the plume. Count Frumpenhausen however thought otherwise; and a violent dispute arose. The General, with the characteristic bravery of a true warrior, proceeded to protect his plunder by force of arms—or rather of fists; and he made a desperate onslaught on Count Frumpenhausen. The combat raged between the two; and while they were thus fighting, Herr Humbogh, the Privy Seal, walked quietly off with the plume: and seating himself at the farther end of the apartment, began attaching it to his own beaver, in the very place where the said beaver (which was a shocking bad one) was most battered. Count Wronki's interference put an end to the quarrel between the valorous General and the titled Frumpenhausen: but nothing could induce Herr Humbogh to deliver up the plume; and sticking his hat, thus decorated, on the side of his head, he strutted to and fro with such an air of defiance that neither of the two discomfited disputants dared approach him in a menacing manner.

With mingled feelings of disgust and amazement, yet entertwined with an almost irresistible sense of whatsoever was ludicrous in these proceedings,—Christian repaired to the secretary's room: but he found the door locked, and therefore naturally concluded that his lordship Baron Raggidbak had thus shut himself in to finish his task in peace and quietness. Our young hero accordingly returned to the ante-chamber, which he reached just at the moment the waiter was reappearing to report progress to the two Chevaliers in respect to the ducal inexpressibles. Christian therefore overheard the explanation. Gold-lace, it was represented, was exceedingly dear; and as the broadest stripes had been placed on his Royal Highness's pantaloons—besides the said pantaloons being re-seated—the cost thereof amounted to three guineas, which the tailor, without meaning any disrespect towards the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, would rather see paid before he delivered up the unmentionables. Christian could not help thinking that this was a pretty pickle for a reigning Duke to be placed in; and doubtless the two Chevaliers thought so likewise. They hastily conferred together in German for a few moments: then the Chevalier Gumbinnen, putting his hand into his pocket, drew forth eighteenpence—while the Chevalier Kadger, imitating his example, displayed three pence three farthings: but as these united sums were very far from making up the requisite amount, the faces of the two Chevaliers became exceedingly blank, and their manner singularly bewildered. At this crisis Baron Farthenless, the Privy Purse, appeared upon the scene; and Christian thought that no advent could possibly be more propitious than that of the high functionary who had charge of the ducal exchequer. But, alas! the Baron's name proved to be typical of his condition—namely, farthingless; and no money was therefore

forthcoming. Christian—in spite of his resolves not to be fleeced by his German friends—now stepped forward; and addressing himself to the Chevalier Kadger, said in the most delicate manner, "I have some change at your disposal."

The amount was accordingly produced: the waiter sped off to procure the Royal pantaloons, which now quickly made their appearance, after the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had been kept precisely half-an-hour shivering in the cold for the want of them. Things progressed somewhat more comfortably now: the various toilettes were completed; and as noon approached, a sufficient number of horses arrived from Buckingham Palace for the accommodation of the Duke and his suite. A crowd was collected in the street to feast their eyes with the grandeur of the imposing procession; and his Royal Higness marched forth in all the glory of the inexpressibles which Christian Ashton's money had redeemed from pawn at the hands of the mistrustful tailor. Herr Humbogh looked splendid indeed with the plume of pheasant's feathers; and Baron Raggidbak's breeches held firmly together as his lordship mounted the steed allotted to his use. The other nobles and gentlemen of the suite were equally well pleased with their own toilettes; and as the sun was shining, its beams made all their worthless jewellery glitter like real gold. The ducal *cortege* passed away amidst the cheers of the multitudes, who little suspected what sort of persons they were on whom they thus bestowed their applause. And here we may add that the mistrustful tailor, who would not give the German Sovereign credit for three guineas, forthwith ordered the arms of that self-same sovereign to be fixed above his shop-door; and on the strength of the three guineas' worth of work which he had done, he wrote himself up, "TAILOR, BY APPOINTMENT, TO HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE DUKE OF MAXE-STOLBURG-QUOTHA."

Before concluding this chapter, we will take the liberty of drawing one moral from the incidents we have related: which is, that gathered crowds, instead of thoughtlessly and giddily bestowing their cheers upon royal and aristocratic personages simply because they bear royal and aristocratic titles, should pause to ask themselves whether these personages, by their own merits, deserve the homage thus shown them and the plaudits thus showered upon their heads?

CHAPTER XLI.

THE REVIEW.

THE Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had signified to Christian through Count Wronki, who signified the same through the Chevalier Gumbinnen, who delivered the message through the Chevalier Kadger, that he might take a holiday on this grand occasion. Our hero accordingly resolved to see the review; and he bent his way towards Hyde Park for the purpose.

It is not our intention to enter into descriptive details with regard to the spectacle: suffice it to say that the large enclosure of the Park was occupied by the troops as well as by a large crowd of spectators. Immense numbers of carriages thronged in the drive,—some containing elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen—but most of them being empty, their owners preferring to enter the enclosure upon foot, in order to obtain a nearer view of the military proceedings. Prince Albert and several English generals, attended by "a brilliant staff"—to use the invariable newspaper phrase—were present: but as a matter of course, the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was the lion of the occasion; and the public journals of the following day spoke of this illustrious Prince as being attended by "a splendid retinue of all the great dignitaries of his household." It was however somewhat difficult to conceive by what possible means the reporters could have become so enamoured of Herr Humbogh's plume, Baron Raggidbak's pantaloons, or in short of any portion of the toilet of the Ducal suite. But perhaps, like theatrical properties, it all looked very well at a distance; and we know that the gentlemen of the daily press do not choose to be hypercritical in any matter where Royalty or Royalty's adherents are concerned.

Christian mingled with the crowd, and looked about to see whether his sister, with Lady Octavian Meredith, was present. He however saw nothing of them; and at length getting wearied of the scene, began to think of departure. He had gained the outskirt of the crowd, when he beheld the Honourable Mr. Stanhope lounging along upon foot; and it was tolerably evident that this gentleman must have lunched well, for it was clear that he was labouring under the effect of copious potations. Not that he was so far intoxicated as to stagger about: but he was much excited, and with an impudent leer was regarding all the good-looking females who happened to come in his way. Christian felt an insuperable disgust for this man, with the villany of whose character he was so well acquainted; and as he beheld him rivet his insolent libertine looks upon several females who did not happen to have any male companions, he could scarcely restrain his indignation. All of a sudden he perceived an elegantly dressed young lady hastening along, and looking with a sort of wildness all about, as if she had by accident been separated from the friends who brought her thither, or else as if she were in search of some particular equipage amongst the countless vehicles which were drawn up three deep in the road against the wooden barriers. But now, as she drew nigh and Christian caught a glimpse of her countenance, how great was his surprise and joy on recognising the beautiful Isabella Vincent!

He was springing forward to greet her, and to ascertain wherefore she was thus looking confused and dismayed, when he beheld Wilson Stanhope accost her; and he evidently said something impudent—for Isabella flung upon him a look of dignified indignation, though at the same instant her countenance became crimson. This was sufficient—aye, and far more than sufficient to excite Christian to the extreme of irritation against that treacherous accomplice in the Duke of Marchmont's foul iniquity. With one bound Christian was upon the spot; and quick as thought Stanhope was levelled with the earth,—our young hero's hand dealing the blow which thus prostrated him.

"Heavens, Miss Vincent!" he ejaculated, in-

stantaneously turning towards the young lady; "that ruffian dared insult you—as he once insulted my sister!"

But Isabella could not speak a word: she was so overwhelmed with confusion and affright. A crowd was gathering round the spot, and numerous voices ejaculated an approval of what our hero had done; for he was not the only one who had been observing Stanhope's insolent behaviour. As for this individual himself, he sprang to his feet and was about to give vent to bitter imprecations against the gallant one who had stricken him down; but recognising our young hero, he became speechless—was cowed and dismayed: for he had heard from Marchmont the *denouement* of the plot at Oaklands, and how it had been so completely frustrated and exposed through Christian's instrumentality. A policeman quickly made his way through the crowd; and while Christian led Miss Vincent off, the bystanders acquainted the constable with Mr. Stanhope's insolent conduct, and how deservedly it had been chastised. It was evident too that Stanhope had been drinking; and the police-officer summarily ejected him from the park,—threatening to take him into custody if he dared offer the slightest resistance.

Meanwhile Christian, as already said, had hurried Isabella away; and the beautiful girl of sixteen clung to his arm as to that of a protector—or as a sister might to that of a brother. She was still so much under the influence of her agitated feelings as to be for the first few moments totally unable to give utterance to a word, or to express her gratitude to Christian otherwise than by a look; and in this there was a certain tenderness which though quite consistent with virginal modesty and maiden bashfulness, nevertheless seemed to confirm the youth's hope that he was not altogether indifferent to her. Nor did he immediately speak again, when thus leading her away from the crowd that had gathered on the spot where he so chivalrously vindicated her insulted innocence. There was a paradise of feeling in the youth's soul—a pure and holy ecstacy of the heart, which those who have loved well and fondly cannot fail to comprehend, and which was too deep for utterance. At length he said, in that low voice which invariably belongs to emotions so profound—so ineffably blissful, "Were you separated from your friends, Miss Vincent?—were you looking for any one?"

"Yes, Mr. Ashton," she answered. "But permit me to express all the gratitude——Ah! here he is!" she abruptly ejaculated.

At the same moment a tall, handsome, elegantly dressed young gentleman came hurrying towards them; and at the very first glimpse of that countenance of perfect manly beauty, Christian could not help experiencing a sudden pang which was very much like that of jealousy—if not jealousy, at all events a feeling of annoyance that another should have a right to claim the privilege of escorting the lovely Isabella.

"Why, how was it that we missed you?" exclaimed the handsome individual, gazing with astonishment when he thus perceived Miss Vincent leaning upon the arm of our hero—who was younger than himself, and in every degree as handsome.

"It was that sudden movement of the crowd," answered Isabella, "which caused such confusion where we were standing. And, Oh! I have been so insulted—and this gentleman," she continued, looking gratefully towards Christian, "conducted himself with so much generosity——"

"I most sincerely thank you," said the handsome personage, taking Christian's hand and pressing it warmly. "Pardon me if I be somewhat abrupt—but there are others close by who are uneasy on Miss Vincent's behalf——"

Thus speaking, he proffered his arm to Isabella,—by his manner and his unfinished speech showing that he was anxious to hurry her away. She shook hands wtih Christian; and with another look expressed her gratitude,—expressed it too with a slight tinge of tenderness, as much as a delicate-minded young lady could possibly display. Her companion bowed courteously: they hurried on in the direction of a carriage, in which a gentleman and lady were seated, but whose faces Christian could not obtain a glimpse of. Isabella and her companion at once entered this carriage, which immediately dashed away; and our hero saw that it was the same which had been sent a week back to convey Miss Vincent from Mrs. Chubb's house. He was half inclined to inquire of one of the lacqueys belonging to the other carriages whose equipage that particular one was; but they were all busy in leaping up to their places, for the throng of vehicles was being set in motion to take up their owners wheresoever they might be found, as the review was now over and the crowds were pouring out of the enclosure. Therefore Christian walked slowly away without putting the question; and in his heart there was a strange commingling of pleasurable and disagreeable sensations. The look of virginal tenderness which Isabella had thrown upon him, produced the former feeling: but on the other hand, he could not think with any degree of satisfaction, of the companionship in which he had left her—the companionship of that young, handsome, elegantly-dressed, and aristocratic-looking personage. Besides, it was but too evident that she had found either wealthy relatives or friends; and though in one sense he rejoiced that her position should be so suddenly improved, yet on the other hand he could not help thinking that this very improvement in her circumstances had opened an immense gulf between herself and him. Yet again did hope steal into his soul with a soothing and solacing effect,—that youthful hope which in the flight of fancy surmounts all barriers and overleaps all chasms, however high the former and however profound the latter.

Retracing his way slowly from Hyde Park, Christian wandered through the streets, reflecting on all that had occurred,—until he approached the tavern where he was accustomed to dine since he had lodged at Mrs. Chubb's, and for which an hour in the afternoon was allowed by his ducal employer. He entered the coffee-room of the tavern—seated himself at the table—and gave his orders to the waiter. The place was unusually crowded; and in the course of a few minutes another gentleman came and took a seat at the same table. He was a foreigner—bearded and moustached—well-dressed—and of good manners. Making Christian a bow with true continental politeness, he expressed a hope that he should not

be inconveniencing him by sitting down at the same table. He spoke English with considerable fluency, though with a German accent: Christian at once set him at his ease in respect to the object of apology; and they soon got into a conversation together. After a few indifferent remarks, the German gentleman began to speak of the grand military spectacle in Hyde Park, and which it appeared he had witnessed.

"And I also saw it," responded our hero. "It was given in honour of one of your native princes, who was present with his retinue."

"Ah—his retinue," said the German, with a short dry cough: and then he drank his wine, but with a peculiar look as if he could say something if he chose.

Christian perceived what was passing in his mind; and being curious to glean all he could in respect to his German friends, he thought it more prudent to abstain from intimating that he himself held a temporary post in his Royal Highness's service.

"If it be not impertinent," he said, "do you come from that part of Germany in which the Duke's dominions are situated?"

"Ah bah! his dominions!" ejaculated the German, evidently no longer able to restrain himself: "pretty dominions indeed!—a few hundred acres! Why, you have plenty of noblemen and gentlemen in your country possessing estates any one of which is as large as the whole Duchy of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

"Do you disparage your own native institutions?" asked Christian, with a smile.

"I hate and detest the institutions," responded the foreigner, with strong emphasis, "which have parcelled out that fine country into all these wretched trumpery principalities, miserable in extent and of the meanest poverty. I am for German nationality—Germany to be one and indivisible; and therefore you may readily conceive that I am no friend to its present partition. It is nothing but a nest of execrable despotisms—all the more execrable too, because so thoroughly paltry and insignificant. A traveller may contemplate with a certain reverential awe, even if not with love, a mighty chain of mountains that bars his way: but if he find himself stopped by a wretched ant-hill, he would be overwhelmed with shame and disgust—he would be shocked at his own miserable self-abasement at not being able to clear such a barrier. In the same way would he contemplate with awe the spectacle of a broad and ample river impeding his course: but what would be his feelings if he found himself compelled to stop short on the edge of a dirty and insignificant puddle! Thus is it with these paltry German despotisms, in comparison with the huge ones of other nations that I might name: and yet they all alike serve as barriers to human progress."

"It is true," said Christian, at once appreciating the truth of his companion's reasoning.

"And you will be all the more struck by what I have said," continued the latter, "when I inform you that I myself am a native of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and consequently a subject—bah, a subject!" he repeated with indescribable disgust—"of this very Duke in whose honour the grand review has to-day been held."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Christian, whose curiosity was all the more vividly excited because he saw that his German acquaintance had something yet to reveal. "Your conversation interests me much——"

"And I could, if I chose, astonish you more than I have interested you," interrupted the German: then, after a pause, he went on to say in a confidential manner and in a whispering tone, "I saw this precious retinue to which you just now alluded; and I recognised all the knaves composing it as well as I should recognise my own brother if he came into the room at this moment. Aye—and my blood boils with shame and indignation at the bare idea of the astounding cheat which is being practised upon the English people. All Germany is degraded, humiliated, and dishonoured by this fellow of a Duke who dresses up his lacqueys and bestows upon them titles of nobility which they only bear while in England, and which they will have to put off when they get back to Germany and return to the pantry, the stable, and the kitchen."

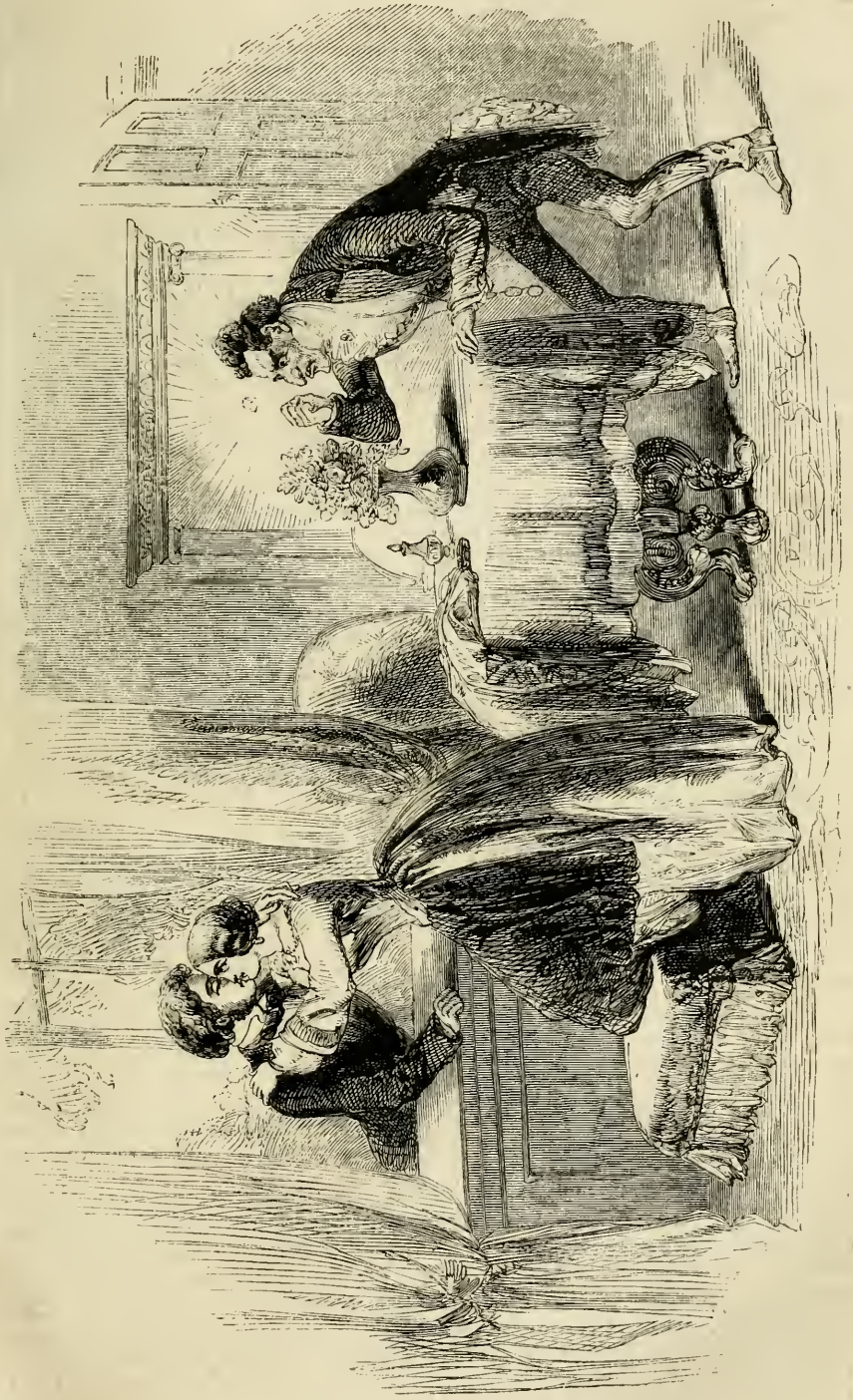
"Surely you are using some hyperbolic figure of speech?" exclaimed Christian, perfectly astounded at what he had just heard.

"No figure of speech at all," responded the German, who spoke with the concentrated bitterness of supreme disgust, but with an air of the most genuine sincerity. "If you have patience to hear me run through the catalogue of names, with the real and the fictitious avocations of the individuals themselves, I will tell you something that cannot fail to strike you with amazement."

Christian leant over the table with a look of profoundest interest; and the German gentleman proceeded as follows:—

"In the first place, there is the fellow Wronki, who is in reality the Duke's butler: but he is dubbed a Count for the nonce and elevated to the dignity of Lord Steward. Then there is Gumbinnen, who when at home in Germany is the Duke's valet: but in England he is a Chevalier and Lord Chamberlain. Thirdly there is the half-starved scamp Raggidbak, the Duke's stable groom, but who is now called Groom of the Stole and dubbed a Baron. When he gets back to Germany he will have to shovel up the dung again. Then comes Himmelspinken—he is another groom, but here called a General and Master of the Horse. Master of the horse indeed! he has rubbed one down pretty often, I can tell you! Next comes Herr Humbogh—and a veritable humbug too, as you would call him in your language. Here he is figuring away as the Privy Seal,—whereas in Germany he is messenger at the Duke's gate. The fellow Kadger is in reality a footman, but now a Chevalier and Equerry. Frumpenhausen, rejoicing in the title of Count, and acting as Gold Stick, is a lacquey who attends on the Duke's carriage; and in that capacity carries the brass-headed cane which here is dignified as a gold stick. Ah! there is one more whom I had almost forgotten; and this is the man Farthenless, who must be very much astonished to find himself a Baron, but perhaps still more so at being Privy Purse, seeing that the ducal purse is not so capacious as to render a custodian necessary. But now—what do you think Farthenless is? A pawnbroker's man!"

Christian could not speak for astonishment.



"Yes—such, I can assure you, is the fact," proceeded the German: "and I will tell you how it happens. You must know that all the Duke's plate was unfortunately in pledge when he received the invitation to pay his present visit to England. What was to be done? he could not redeem it: the pawnbroker would not part with it out of his own keeping; and a reigning Sovereign could not come to England to stay at a hotel without his own plate. The dilemma was serious: but a compromise was hit upon. It was agreed that the pawnbroker's assistant should bring over the plate,—travelling in the ducal retinue, and with special injunctions to keep a sharp eye upon the property: for the Duke is quite as capable of laying hands upon it as any of the starvelings that surround him. So I suppose it was deemed prudent to give the fellow Farthenless an official department: hence the dignity of Baron and the post of Privy Purse,—both of which he will have to renounce the instant he gets back to Germany."

Christian was amazed almost to stupefaction by what he had heard; and the especial care which he had seen Baron Farthenless bestow upon the ducal plate was now fully accounted for. He remained a little longer in conversation with the intelligent German, and then took his departure from the tavern, more than half inclined to send in his resignation to his Royal Highness. But when he reflected that the term for which he was engaged would elapse in another fortnight, he considered that it would be as well to remain for so short a space: and to this decision he accordingly came. We need hardly inform the reader that the principal subject which continued to occupy his mind,—and to which all that related to the pauper Duke and his frowzy horde, was but of second-rate importance,—was the new and indeed brilliant position in which he found Isabella placed: nor less did he ponder with some degree of uneasiness on her companionship with that handsome and elegant-looking young man. Still Christian flattered himself that he was not altogether indifferent to the young lady; and he entertained so high an opinion of her, that he could not believe she would prove faithless to any such tender feeling entertained on his behalf—if it were really experienced. But on the other hand, a fear would steal into his mind that the influence of the new friends, or of the relatives—whichever they were—whom Isabella had found, might possibly lead her to yield to their views, and form some brilliant alliance which it was natural enough they should seek for her. Still, as we have said on former occasions, there was hope in the youth's heart; and in juxtaposition with his apprehensions, did imagination conjure up a proportionate amount of cheering dreams.

Thus the fortnight passed away,—during which Christian saw nothing more of the beautiful Isabella, and experienced no farther adventure in respect to the Germans at all deserving of notice. At the end of that period he received his dismissal, together with a certificate of good conduct from his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha; and he was once more out of employment. Again he inserted an advertisement in the newspapers; and in the course of a few days he received a note from the Earl of Lascelles, desiring him to call at his mansion at Kensington.

It was a fine day in the month of March, and about the hour of noon, that Christian Ashton proceeded to Kensington; and was introduced into a large and handsomely furnished library, where he was desired to wait a few minutes and his lordship would be with him. Christian examined the book-shelves, and found that they were crowded with splendidly-bound volumes,—belonging, as a matter of course, to all classes of literature: but it occurred to him that very few appeared to have been at all used. Indeed, the impression produced upon his mind was that the library was what it too often is in the mansions of the great—intended more for show than for service. He wondered to himself what sort of a nobleman the Earl of Lascelles would prove to be; and in imagination he was depicting a tall, aristocratic-looking individual, when the door opened, and an old gentleman of sixty, of most ungainly figure—apparelled with a ludicrous admixture of *old beau* dandyism and of slovenliness—with large prominent features, the expression of which almost provoked an inclination to laughter—made his appearance. Christian was marvelling who this could be—whether the major-domo, the butler, the valet, ar any other functionary of the nobleman's household—when the odd-looking individual, advancing straight up to him, said with a patronizing smile, "So you are the young gentleman who advertised for the post of private secretary? Well, upon my word, your appearance is prepossessing enough. You say your testimonials are good?—but I am terribly difficult to please, and I must examine you critically."

Christian had now no longer any doubt as to whose presence it was in which he stood: but he could not help thinking that his lordship was more fitted by nature to play the part of buffoon upon the stage, than to enact that of an hereditary legislator.

"Sit down, Mr. Ashton, and let us converse," resumed the Earl of Lascelles. "First of all, with regard to the testimonials?"

Christian produced them; and as the Earl took the papers, he said, "You see I can read perfectly well without spectacles; and yet now-a-days it seems to be the fashion for gentlemen to take to glasses at my age—which is five-and-forty."

Christian could scarcely help starting; for he would have wagered his existence that the Earl was sixty, if he was a single day.

"Ah, an excellent testimonial from the Duke of Marchmont! I know his Grace well. Between you and me," continued the Earl, "they say that his Grace and myself are the two stars of the House—in respect to personal appearance, I mean."

Again Christian felt astonished—as well indeed he might: for the Duke of Marchmont was a tall, well-made personage, and he had once been handsome enough until dissipation and evil passions had begun to mar his good looks: whereas the Earl of Lascelles had never the slightest pretensions to any such good looks at all, and was now a living counterfeit—an animate artificiality—a peripatetic cheat—a breathing lie—made up of padded garments, false hair and false teeth, and even a false complexion.

"Yes—we are called the stars of the House," continued his lordship, with an air of bland and

condescending communicativeness, at the same time grinning like an antiquated goat: "but as for eloquence, I don't say I flatter myself—I only repeat what the public press says—when I add that his Grace cannot hold a candle to me. You shall come some evening to the House when I am going to make one of my grand displays of three or four hours. You will be astonished at the effect! Some of the noble Lords rush out from the House the moment I rise, and never come back till I have done: they can't stand the excitement of such thrilling oratory. Others will listen all the time with their eyes shut, so that they may concentrate their attention inwardly, and not lose a single word of what falls from my lips. I am not vain, Mr. Ashton—though vanity is, after all, the foible of young men like you and me: but I *may* say that those are the effects of a very peculiar power of oratory."

"Doubtless, my lord," answered Christian: and perhaps his response was susceptible of a double interpretation.

"Ah! this testimonial is from his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. I knew his father well. I had a grand battle with him once——"

"In the war-time, my lord?" asked Christian, fancying that he ought to say something.

"No—at the dinner-table," responded the Earl. "The Duke prided himself upon being a very great eater, and was honoured accordingly in his own capital and by all the German Sovereigns. Well, during my travels, I arrived in the city of Quotha; and hearing of the Duke's fame, was determined to put it to the test. I must tell you that his Serene Highness——for the German Princes were only *Serene* in those days, and not *Royal*——His Serene Highness, as I was saying, was fond of challenges of that sort; and prided himself on having eaten three Englishmen into an apoplexy and four Scotchmen into an indigestion which turned to chronic dyspepsia; so that when I respectfully provoked him to a contest, he made sure of achieving an additional triumph. I laid his Serene Highness five thousand guineas against the Order of the Cormorant, instituted by his Serene Highness himself. Well, we sat down to table, surrounded by the whole Court. His Serene Highness led the way with a dish of sour krout: but I declared that I could not do things in such a peddling, trifling manner; and I requested to have a barrel brought in. You would scarcely believe it, Mr. Ashton—but I had got into the middle of the barrel before his Serene Highness had got half way through his dish. Then he took the roast meat and poultry: but there I beat him by half a fowl and a pigeon. He insisted upon tackling a dish of hard eggs, thinking that they would stick in my throat: and so they did too, with a vengeance! —but I nevertheless beat him by a yelk. He was ill for six weeks afterwards; and I was the hero of the entire Court during my residence there."

Christian Ashton could not help thinking that his lordship had become a hero on very singular terms; and the Earl proceeded to read the second certificate.

"Well, these are unexceptionable," he said, "and I think you will do."

Christian ventured to inquire what the nature of his duties would be; and the nobleman went on to explain them.

"The fact is, I have travelled a great deal—I have seen many strange things—I have been involved in some extraordinary adventures. I think of publishing my memoirs. I have already made many notes and memoranda; and there will be little trouble in arranging them properly. When I take a thing in hand, I am terribly energetic in carrying it out. My mind is bent upon this; and we shall work furiously. You must come and live in the neighbourhood, so that you may be always at hand when I want you: and as for salary, you may name your own terms."

Christian scarcely thought that the situation would suit him, inasmuch as he had already seen enough of his lordship to form the very meanest idea of his general character. But while he was reflecting—and the Earl was rattling away with some new anecdote, comprising a tissue of falsehoods—the youth, happening to glance from the window (the library being on the ground floor) perceived two ladies strolling with a gentleman in the grounds. He could not see their faces: but the figure of one of those ladies produced an immediate impression upon our young hero,—filling his heart with mingled hope, astonishment, and suspense. His countenance did not however betray any of these emotions; and the Earl, happening at the same time to glance through the window, exclaimed, "That lady on the right is the Countess of Lascelles. She is a wife every way worthy of such a husband—young and beautiful, elegant and accomplished. And that is my son, Lord Osmond. Ah! I see you start with surprise—and well you may. You naturally wonder that I can have a son of his age? But between you and me, I was wonderfully precocious, and was a father at seventeen. That other young lady is my niece, Miss Vincent."

The reader cannot be at a loss to conjecture why Christian had started. It was not because he was in the least astonished at the vain and frivolous Earl having a son of such an age, seeing that he had rightly guessed his lordship's own years to have reached sixty, so that he might very well have a son of twenty-three: but it was that at the moment the trio turned round at the end of the gravel walk—and Christian not only recognised in Lord Osmond the tall handsome young man through whom he had already experienced some little degree of mental trouble, but the sight of Isabella's lovely countenance had sent a thrill of joy through his heart. He now no longer hesitated to accept the proffered situation. He paused not to reflect whether he should be allowed to retain it when it came to be discovered that he was acquainted with Miss Vincent: the bare thought of obtaining a post which might bring him for hours together within the same walls which she evidently inhabited, was alone sufficient to make him hasten to conclude the bargain. The matter of salary was soon settled; and it was understood that he was to remove into the neighbourhood that very day, in order to be at hand to commence his duties on the ensuing one.

"I mean to treat you quite in a friendly and confidential manner," proceeded the Earl; "and therefore come with me and I will introduce you to the ladies and my son."

Thus speaking, the Earl opened a casement reaching down to the ground, and which therefore served the purpose of a glass door, affording egress upon the grounds. Christian followed with a heart palpitating violently. A thousand hopes and fears swept in a few moments through his mind: for he knew that now was the crisis to decide whether he should retain the post so eagerly sought, or whether the Earl should think fit to decline his services.

"My dear Ethel," exclaimed the old nobleman, hastening towards the Countess, "I am going to do what I have said! I shall write my memoirs—I have engaged a secretary—he is fully competent—we begin work to-morrow morning—and as he is a very genteel youth, I want to introduce him."

Lord Osmond fancied at the first glance which he threw upon Christian, that he had seen him somewhere before—but did not instantaneously recollect the how or the when. But Isabella's astonishment—and we may add her pleasure—were great indeed on perceiving Christian Ashton diffidently advancing behind her uncle, and on hearing the old nobleman proclaim that he had engaged him as a secretary.

"Why, cousin Bella!" said Lord Osmond, suddenly remembering where he had seen Christian, and now turning to Miss Vincent; "this is the very young gentleman who acted so nobly three or four weeks back at the review."

"Hey!—what?" cried the Earl in astonishment, but by no means in dissatisfaction: "Mr. Ashton the one who chastised that impertinent coxcomb? How was it you did not mention his name, Bella?"

"I did mention his name, uncle," answered Miss Vincent, with a modest blush: "I told you it was Mr. Ashton—with whom I happened to be acquainted——"

"Yes, I remember perfectly well," said the Countess of Lascelles, "that Isabella mentioned Mr. Ashton's name."

"Then I had forgotten it!" exclaimed the nobleman. "But it is no matter."

"I am pleased to meet you again, Mr. Ashton," said Lord Osmond, frankly proffering his hand to our young hero.

Isabella also gave him her hand; and again did the modest blush appear upon her countenance. Lord Osmond observed that tremulous confusion on her part—but affected not to notice it. As for the Earl—*he* saw it not: for he had turned to his wife, and was launching forth into a description of the marvellous adventures he intended to give in his book, and of the tremendous sensation it was certain to excite when published. Christian now thought it becoming to make his bow and depart; and the Earl charged him to be punctual at the mansion at eleven o'clock on the following day. The youth was retiring through the grounds towards the entrance-gates, when he beheld that same individual (mentioned to him as Mr. Gibson) who had fetched away Miss Vincent from Mr. Chubb's residence. The recognition was instantaneously mutual; and the man with a sinister look started visibly on thus beholding our hero. He however said nothing; and Christian took his departure with feelings of mingled joy and wonderment. The source of his joy needs no description: but we must say a word or two in respect to the other feeling which inspired him. Was he to conclude that it was *not* on his account after all, that the beauteous Isabella had been removed from the parish-clerk's house? But if not so, then what became of Mrs. Chubb's tale relative to Mr. Gibson's annoyance at finding that he was lodging in the same house with Isabella? However, Christian had obtained the situation—the Earl had confirmed him in it after discovering that he was previously acquainted with Miss Vincent—and therefore though our hero wondered at some part of the whole proceeding, he had nothing to be troubled at: on the contrary, every reason to be rejoiced.

We have said that Lord Osmond noticed Isabella's tremulous confusion when she encountered Christian, but that he affected not to perceive it. This circumstance requires some little explanation. Lord Osmond, as the reader is aware, was profoundly enamoured of his mother-in-law, the beautiful Countess of Lascelles; and therefore he entertained not the slightest scintillation of jealousy in respect to his cousin Isabella and Christian Ashton. On the contrary,—when he thought he had discovered that these two were not indifferent to each other, he was rather glad of it; for it immediately struck him that if Isabella and Christian could be more or less thrown together, it would afford him (Lord Osmond) all the better opportunities of being alone with Ethel.

About an hour after Christian's departure, the Earl of Lascelles was seated in the library, arranging his memoranda in readiness for work on the following day,—when the confidential valet Makepeace entered the room on some pretence or another.

"Well, Makepeace," said the nobleman, looking up from his papers with a self-satisfied air, "I mean to astonish the whole world."

"The world, my lord," responded the sycophantic valet, "can be astonished at no achievement on your lordship's part."

"I think there is some truth in that," said the Earl, caressing his chin as he lounged back in the chair. "Nevertheless, my contemplated book will crown all my other triumphs; and I have engaged a secretary to assist in writing it."

"That young gentleman, my lord, whom I saw going out just now?" inquired Makepeace deferentially.

"The same," rejoined the Earl. "I am convinced he is a youth of great ability and lively intelligence, by the way, he listened to that anecdote of mine about my German feat. I don't think I ever told it you——"

For the first time in his life Makepeace did not wait to hear the anecdote: but interrupting his noble master, said significantly, "I presume your lordship cannot be aware that this is the very young gentleman——"

"Who lodged at the Rubb's or the Dubb's, or whatever their name is?" exclaimed the Earl. "In general I have an excellent memory for names: but I have lost sight of that one. Do you know, Makepeace, that when I was travelling in Russia, I fell in with a young Englishman, who had dislocated his jaw?"

"Indeed, my lord! Was it by a fall from his horse?"

"Oh, no!—merely by pronouncing the names of Russian noblemen, some of which would cover a sheet of paper to write them, and are all consonants. But *I* could pronounce them all with the greatest ease. Indeed, I was always a good hand at hard words. When I was seven years old I had all the classics at my fingers' ends; and made no difficulty of that name which was invented by Plautus—Thesaurochrysonichochrysides."

"I have often admired your lordship's extraordinary memory on such points," said Makepeace. "But about that young man——"

"Well, I know all about him," exclaimed the Earl: "he lodged at the parish-clerk's. But don't you see that things are greatly altered now; and even if there was ever any danger of my niece falling in love with the youth, there cannot be under existing circumstances. Besides, the landlady herself assured you that the young people scarcely ever saw each other; and now that I have purposely had Isabella brought home to the mansion that she may captivate my son's heart, she will of course jump at so splendid an alliance. Ah, it was an admirable stroke of policy on my part! But I think you will admit, Makepeace, that I am rather a shrewd and far-seeing man?"

"Your lordship is aware I have always expressed my astonishment that your lordship has not accepted the post of Prime Minister, which I am aware has been declined by your lordship on more occasions than one."

"Well, Makepeace, perhaps I had my reasons," said the Earl complacently. "But about the matter of which you were speaking. You see that when Lord Osmond threw himself at my feet a couple of months back, and implored my pardon for his previous misconduct in choosing to show his airs in respect to my second marriage, I could not very well help forgiving him. Besides, when I questioned her ladyship with regard to the motive of the visit he paid her at that time, she frankly informed me it was to convey through her the assurance of his contrition. What, then, was I to do? There was no alternative but to forgive Lord Osmond—and in forgiving him, to intimate that he might return and live at home. Then, don't you see, other reflections arose in my mind? Of course I am not jealous: I flatter myself that Lord Osmond, though younger than me, has not much the advantage in respect to good looks. In fact, between you and me, Makepeace, I don't think his hair curls so nicely, nor with such a natural effect, as this new peruke of mine. However, without being jealous, you know, it was only proper and becoming enough that I should give the Countess a female companion—you comprehend—not only for her own sake, and to prevent her from being thrown too much into the society of one whom I know that in her heart she does not like—but also to prevent the scandal-loving, tittle-tattling, gossiping part of the world from having any ground for impertinent or malicious observations. You understand, Makepeace—eh?"

"Perfectly, my lord," responded the valet, with his wonted obsequious bow. "The policy was admirable, my lord—admirable."

"I was sure you would say so," continued the Earl. "Well, then, when you came and told me that, contrary to all previous understanding, there was a young gentleman lodging in the same house where Miss Vincent had been placed, it set me a thinking; and when I *do* think, Makepeace, it is no ordinary affair, I can tell you! In fact, I always reason with myself—there is nothing like it: I find it so much easier to convince myself than any one else. So, while I was thinking on this subject, I came to the conclusion that it was necessary to remove Miss Vincent from a house where she might run the chance of falling in love with somebody who would not be rich enough to make her his wife. One thought leads to another, Makepeace; and so it struck me that I might just as well have the girl home at once;—for, after all, she had nothing to do with her deceased parents' offences against me. I reasoned that she would be an excellent companion for the Countess; and that if my son chose to fall in love with her, I really need not have any objection to their marriage. He will have plenty of money of his own; and after all, the sooner he does marry the better."

"To be sure, my lord," answered Makepeace.

"And since you told me that Isabella had grown up to be such a beautiful girl, I thought it highly probable that Lord Osmond *would* fall in love with her. You see, I am very shrewd, Makepeace—very shrewd indeed! Do you know that when I was quite a boy—it was one day at a race-course—I guessed under which thimble the little pea was——a thing that nobody was ever known to do before, or has ever done since. It was the very first time of guessing—and I won half-a-crown. I remember it perfectly well, because I played on and lost nine pounds afterwards—which was all I had about me."

"Your lordship was always noted for intelligence," observed the sycophantic valet.

"Well, you see my calculations are becoming correct. I watch Lord Osmond pretty narrowly; and always in my presence he shows the greatest attention towards Miss Vincent, and is exceedingly cool towards the Countess. Perhaps I should be offended at this conduct on his part towards her ladyship, were it not that lovers are always obliged to be cool to every lady except the object of their affection. Have not you noticed that my son *is* cool—almost pointedly so—in respect to her ladyship?"

"I have, my lord," answered Makepeace, who, as the reader has observed, invariably shaped his responses so as to suit the humour of his noble master.

"Well then, all things considered, Makepeace," continued the Earl, "there is no harm done in engaging this youth as my private secretary. You comprehend? Miss Vincent is sure to marry Lord Osmond; and there is not the slightest chance that she will bestow her affections on young Ashton. Besides, don't you see? the presence of this exceedingly good-looking youth in the house will put my son on his mettle, so to speak—and will make him ply his suit all the more arduously with Isabella. Ha! ha! Makepeace, another proof of shrewdness—eh? another admirable stroke of policy on my part?"

The valet of course assented, and here the discourse terminated,—the foolish old nobleman chuckling over the various combinations which he was thus bringing about, and flattering himself

that there was not in all the world such a cunning dog as he was.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE TWO ACCIDENTS.

Before removing from Mrs. Chubb's to a new lodging at Kensington, Christian proceeded to pay two visits—one to his sister, and the other to Mr. Redcliffe. He communicated to Christina the intelligence that he had obtained a new situation; and the affectionate girl was delighted to find that her beloved brother so easily procured one employment after another. But on proceeding to Mrs. Macaulay's in Mortimer Street, Christian learnt that Mr. Redcliffe had been out of town for some days, and that it was altogether uncertain when he would come back. Christian therefore left a note for him,—making his kind friend acquainted with the change in his position, and expressing a hope to hear from him on his return to London. He then removed to Kensington, and entered upon the duties of his new situation.

Two or three weeks passed; and it was now the beginning of April. Three months had elapsed since Christina Ashton became the companion of Lady Octavian Meredith; and it becomes necessary for us to describe what had taken place during this interval. The reader will remember that Lord Octavian had persuaded Christina not to mention to Zoe the circumstance of their previous acquaintance, nor in any way to allude to the duel. It will likewise be borne in mind that it was with considerable reluctance the pure-minded Christina had assented to a course which she conceived to be fraught with a certain degree of duplicity towards her amiable friend and benefactress. Nevertheless, influenced by Lord Octavian's sophistical reasoning, the artless and inexperienced Christina was led to believe it was really for the sake of insuring Zoe's happiness, and to avoid giving a shock to her confidence in her husband, that the secret of the duel was to be so religiously kept.

For the first few weeks after our young heroine was installed in her new home, Lord Octavian's conduct was of such a character as to give her not the slightest uneasiness. He never sought to be alone with her: he never regarded her in a way that might lead her to suspect that he cherished a passion for her: his demeanour was precisely what it ought to be—that of a friendly but respectful courtesy. Nevertheless, the young nobleman continued to love Christina passionately, devotedly—we might almost say madly: but he endeavoured to exercise the strongest control over his feelings; and if he could not subdue them, he at least did not betray them. The reader has seen that there were many good qualities about Lord Octavian Meredith,—that he was naturally generous-hearted—and that though he did not love Zoe in the true meaning of the term, he nevertheless cherished a profound gratitude towards the wife who had brought him a fortune—and therefore experienced a full sense of his duty towards that wife. Besides, he perceived that she was devotedly attached to him; and it frequently made his heart cry out as it were in anguish to think that he could not adequately return the abounding fulness of the affection which she bestowed upon him. For all these reasons he made the mightiest efforts to stifle the feelings which he experienced towards Christina, and to force himself to remain in *deed* faithful to his wife, even if he could not be so in *thought*.

Thus, as we have said, several weeks passed away; and Christina had not the slightest reason to suspect that he cherished so profound a passion for her. It will be remembered that on the first day of her arrival he had rapturously taken her hand, and had regarded her with a degree of fervid admiration which she could not possibly help observing, and which had made her withdraw that hand somewhat abruptly, as the colour mounted to her cheeks and as her eyes were cast down: but she was led to reflect at the time that the man who had rescued her from insult, and had risked his life as the consequence, could not possibly mean himself to insult her. Therefore this particular incident which we have just brought back to the reader's recollection, and which occurred on the first day of her arrival, had not since dwelt sufficiently in her mind to amount to a suspicion as to the real state of Lord Octavian's feelings towards her. But, at the expiration of a few weeks, a little incident occurred which began to produce a change in Christina's mind and make her think tremblingly on several subjects.

It was one day—while her brother was still in the employment of the German prince—that Christina, while descending with some degree of rapidity from her own chamber to the drawing-room, trod upon one of the brass rods of the stair-carpet which had got loose; and as it rolled beneath her foot, she fell heavily backward. Her head came with such sudden concussion against the stairs that she was so stupified as to be unable to raise herself up. Some one was at the moment ascending the lower flight: it was Lord Octavian—and on perceiving what had happened, he sprang to our heroine's assistance. He raised her up in his arms,—exclaiming, "Good God, are you hurt? Oh, speak to me! for heaven's sake, speak to me! Sooner my own life, ten thousand times over, than your's!"

These words startled Christina into fullest vitality again. Blushing, and full of confusion, she extricated herself from Lord Octavian's arms:—bewildered by the effects of the blow and the impassioned ejaculations which had just burst from his lips, she could not murmur forth a single syllable of thanks for the succour he had rendered her: she staggered into the drawing-room, and sank upon a sofa with a returning sense of faintness. Octavian, who had now recovered his own self-possession, rang the bell violently, and ordered the maids to administer at once to Miss Ashton,—describing the accident that had occurred. He then, with considerate delicacy, left the apartment; and in a short time Christina was so far recovered, that she felt nothing beyond the pain arising from a severe contusion. We should observe that Lady Octavian Meredith was passing an hour with her father Mr. Armytage at the time that the accident occurred; and on her return, she was much distressed to hear of it.

But when Christina was alone, and enabled to deliberate without restraint upon the incident just described, what was the nature of her thoughts? Guileless and unsophisticated though she were, she could not possibly help feeling that there was in Octavian's ejaculations a certain enthusiasm and a wildness of fervour thoroughly disproportionate to the occurrence itself, and which therefore raised up a vague and indistinct suspicion in the young damsel's mind. And now too, as she pondered thereupon,—back to her memory came the incident which marked the first day of her arrival, and which we ere now recalled to the remembrance of the reader. She began to see, too, that there was something more than she had previously fancied in Octavian's conduct in calling on her, after the duel, under a feigned name—and also in so urgently beseeching her not to mention their previous acquaintance to Zoe. All these reflections naturally engendered new ideas and troubling suspicions in the mind of Christina. Still the purity of her nature made her endeavour to throw off the influence of these suspicions: but she could not. And furthermore, in strictly and carefully analyzing her own feelings, the conviction gradually stole into her mind that it was more with surprise than displeasure—more with amazed confusion than with indignation or anger—that she had heard at the time those ejaculations sent forth from Octavian's lips. She shuddered with an unknown feeling. She felt as if she were doing something wrong: she thought that she should no longer remain beneath that roof—and indeed that she never ought to have tarried there at all when once she found that a secret subsisted between herself and Octavian and which was to be withheld from Zoe.

Yet what was she to do? To attach of her own accord importance to those ejaculations——no, certainly not! To leave the house precipitately, and without being able to assign any specific cause ——equally impossible! She must remain therefore—at least for the present: there was no other step to be taken. The reader will not be surprised that Christina mentioned not the incident at the time to her brother: it would have been to shock the delicacy of her own soul—to be outraging her own feelings, were she to attach importance to Octavian's ejaculations, or to take it upon herself to give them a specific significancy.

Weeks again passed away—but not in the same manner as before. If ever Octavian and Christina found themselves alone together—which, as they dwelt beneath the same roof, necessarily occurred now and then—there was a mutual constraint: it was a feeling of uneasiness, an awkwardness and embarrassment, reciprocally visible. It appeared as if Octavian had something to say, but dared not give utterance to it; and as if Christina longed to dart from the room, but dared not take a step which would be so significant. Nor, when conversing in Zoe's presence, did the young nobleman and Christina look each other in the face with the same frankness as before. Octavian dared not trust his own regards—and Christina dared not meet them.

Thus painfully progressed matters after the little accident on the staircase. Nor again need the reader marvel if Christina made not a confidant of her brother: for if she analyzed her own feelings, she could not comprehend them—much less could she have explained them. It was with an effort that she now maintained a degree of cheerfulness: whatsoever gaiety she exhibited, was not natural as it was wont to be—but it was forced. At length another incident occurred which proved in its consequences more serious still.

It was the beginning of April: the genial breath of an early Spring was wooing the trees and the hedges to put forth their verdure, and the early flowers to show signs of returning animation. One day Zoe expressed a desire to take a drive into the country in a new phaeton which her husband had just purchased. It happened however that the domestic who attended the equipages, had that very morning received a slight injury from one of the horses, and was unable to do his usual duty. But Octavian—who now more than ever strove to maintain the kindest treatment towards his amiable and devoted wife—was determined that she should not be disappointed; and he suggested that as he himself would drive, they could easily dispense with the livery-servant. They accordingly set out in the new phaeton, drawn by a pair of handsome galloways, caparisoned in the most tasteful manner. Lord Octavian occupied the box: Lady Octavian and Christina were seated together. The drive took place through the northern suburbs of London, and into the country in the direction of Enfield. The horses were a new acquisition, as well as the vehicle itself: they proved to be spirited, and one of them gave some little indications of being vicious. Zoe questioned her husband upon the subject: but he assured her that there was no danger. The young lady was reassured; and the equipage rolled on to some considerable distance from London.

Presently, on the summit of a hill, the sudden opening of the gate of a stable-yard attached to an isolated dwelling, caused the vicious-disposed galloway to shy: whereupon Meredith, in a somewhat intemperate manner, bestowed three or four good stripes upon the animal. They both set off at full speed,—tearing down the hill as if they were mad —the phaeton flying along like a thing of no weight—or as if it were a feather borne on the wing of a hurricane.

"For heaven's sake, sit fast!" exclaimed Meredith, who was doing all he could to hold in the apparently frenzied animals.

Zoe and Christina exchanged affrighted glances, —each perceiving that the other was as pale as death. And no wonder!—for there seemed to be every prospect that the equipage would be dashed to pieces,—swerving as it did from one side of the road to the other—now with the wheels on one side half up a bank—then the next moment a similar process taking place with the wheels on the other side—and the steeds still continuing to tear on in utter defiance of Meredith's endeavour to hold them in. Long as it has taken us to describe all this, it was nevertheless the work of but a very few minutes; and as the equipage dashed precipitately down to the bottom of the steep hill, it was suddenly upset by the side of the road.

The very instant Meredith found the phaeton overturning, he sprang out with a marvellous agility; and though he fell—yet, as it was upon some grass, he escaped comparatively unhurt, and was immediately upon his feet. Christina and

Zoe were flung out violently; and they both lay senseless.

"My God, my God!" cried Octavian, in a voice of the wildest agony: "they are killed!"—and he bounded forward to raise *one* up in his arms—and that one was Christina: then from his lips came ejaculations similar to those which he had uttered on the previous occasion:—"Oh, speak to me! speak to me! for heaven's sake speak to me! Would that I had died instead of you!"

And Christina slowly opened her soft dark eyes; and Octavian, as frenzied now with joy as he was a moment before with terrible affliction, exclaimed, "Thank God, she lives! she lives!——O Christina!"

He was straining her in his arms, when she, awaking to full consciousness, extricated herself from his embrace with an abruptness that under any other circumstances would have been ungracious indeed—but which was now the result of the sudden conviction that swept in unto her soul that he was paying her an attention to which his own wife had the prior claim, though that wife was left neglected upon the ground! And there Zoe still lay, with her eyes closed—although at the first instant that Christina's glances were flung upon her, it struck her that those eyes were half open. The next instant however she supposed it to be mere fancy on her part.

Octavian raised Zoe in his arms: he inquired kindly enough if she were injured:—to do him justice too, he also appeared much distressed:—but there were none of those same wildly vehement and thrillingly impassioned ejaculations which had burst from his lips in respect to Christina. Zoe appeared to be entirely deprived of consciousness: she lay along, half supported in her husband's arms, her head resting upon his shoulder—and he continuing to inquire whether she were hurt?

"Oh, for assistance!" exclaimed Christina, wringing her hands in utter bewilderment: "what can I do? whither can I go? My benefactress! my friend!—Oh, dearest, dearest Zoe!"—and the young damsel, now throwing herself upon her knees, in a gush of uncontrollable emotion seized Lady Octavian's form from Meredith's arms, and locked it in her own fervid embrace.

She felt Zoe's bosom heaving against her own, as if with the prolonged sigh of returning life: then suddenly the tears deluged forth from the lady's eyes—and flinging her arms round Christina's neck, she wept convulsively. Our young heroine breathed the most tender and soothing words in her ears,—again addressing her as a benefactress and a friend—beseeching her to compose herself, and give not way to this outburst, which she naturally supposed to be purely hysterical—the effects of the accident which had just occurred. But Zoe only appeared to cling all the more tenaciously to her affectionate friend's neck,—until seeming suddenly to recollect that her husband was present, she started to her feet and flung herself into his arms. She now grew composed; and Octavian, hastily inquiring of them both whether they felt much injured, was assured that beyond a few bruises neither of the ladies had received any physical hurt.

But now what was to be done? The horses, as if satisfied with upsetting the chaise, had stood still: but the vehicle was much injured; and moreover it was impossible to think of trusting their lives again to the vicious runaways. Fortunately at this moment a carriage drove up to the spot: it contained only a gentleman—and he at once proffered any assistance that he might be enabled to afford. A footman in attendance upon his carriage was accordingly commissioned to take charge of the phaeton, and drive it back to the Regent's Park; while Lord Octavian, Zoe, and Christina took their seats inside the carriage. During the drive to London, Christina manifested the tenderest solicitude towards Zoe, who continued deadly pale, and appeared to have received a more powerful shock than she chose to confess. Her voice was low and plaintive, but marked by an ineffable sweetness; and from time to time she hurriedly raised her kerchief to her face as if wiping away tears. Christina and Octavian were therefore confirmed in the opinion which they had both alike formed; namely, that Zoe had experienced hysterical results from the accident.

The gentleman to whom the carriage belonged, kindly took his companions to their residence in the Regent's Park, although his own destination was in the first instance quite at another point of the metropolis. When once more at home, Zoe sought her couch,—by the side of which Christina declared her intention to remain. Lady Octavian besought her to retire to her own room and rest herself likewise: but our young heroine, experiencing now only very partial effects from the accident, would not listen to the entreaty. Octavian sent for a physician, who prescribed what he thought requisite for Zoe; and agreeing with the others that she was somewhat hysterical, he ordered her to be kept extremely quiet. The medicament he administered doubtless contained some opiate: for shortly after it was taken, Zoe sank into a profound slumber—and Christina remained watching by her side.

And now we have some leisure to speak of Christina's thoughts. A portion of the ejaculations which burst from Octavian's lips, as he held her in his arms on the scene of the accident, had fallen upon her ears. Besides, had she not the fact present and patent to her knowledge, that Octavian had shown the *first* solicitude on her behalf, instead of flying to the succour of the one who had the prior claim? However uncertain she might before have been as to Lord Octavian's sentiments, she could doubt them no longer now. And, alas too! she could not conceal from herself that she on her own side felt not as her sense of duty told her that she ought to feel. On the contrary, there was for an instant a soft thrill of pleasure in her soul as she recalled to mind that ejaculation—"O Christina!" There was a world of avowal in that ejaculation: it was unmistakable—it was more than the eloquence of ten thousand tongues—it was the very heart itself laid bare!

Thus reflected Christina: but now her mind was made up how to act; and this resolve being taken, she felt more at ease. When it was announced to her that dinner was served up in the dining-room, she requested that a morsel of food might be brought to her in Lady Octavian's chamber, where she was resolved to remain. Zoe slept until the evening; and when she awoke and

found Christina still seated by her side, and saw by the tray which by accident was not as yet removed, that our heroine had dined there, she took her hand—drew her gently down towards her—and circling the young girl's neck with her arms, strained her to her bosom. She could not at first find words wherewith to express all her gratitude: but presently she burst into tears. These relieved her surcharged heart; and then she murmured forth in a broken voice her thanks for all Christina's kindness.

Lord Octavian now entered the room to make inquiries concerning his wife; and Zoe, smiling up at him with an amiable sweetness, assured him in a low plaintive voice that she should be better soon. He bent down to kiss her—and she embraced him fervently. Octavian spoke of having a nurse to sit up with her ladyship: but Christina at once said in a voice, the firmness of which showed that she would take no refusal, "That is my duty—and I intend to discharge it."

Zoe remonstrated with all that sweetness which was natural to her, and which now seemed more than ever amiable, invested as it was with the serene but plaintive melancholy that was upon her: but Christina was not to be dissuaded. Octavian withdrew; and our young heroine remained to keep the vigil by Zoe's bedside.

On the following day the physician discovered symptoms of fever on the part of his patient: they progressed rapidly—and in a few hours Zoe was seriously ill. During the night she became delirious, giving utterance to incoherent things, none of which however had any particular significancy. Christina remained in faithful attendance upon her,—never once closing her own eyes the entire night. For ten days did the dangerous period of Lady Octavian Meredith's illness last; and several

times she appeared to be hovering upon the very verge of the grave. The physician, on the third evening, had insisted upon having a nurse: nevertheless Christina would not abandon her friend—but remained with her night and day,—recruiting however her own strength by lying down for a few hours in a bed which she caused to be prepared in the same room for the purpose. With her own hand she administered all Zoe's medicine—but usurping this duty with such sweetness of manner and with so much amiability that the old nurse, though belonging to a class amazingly jealous of their prerogatives, could not find it in her heart to be offended. Nor throughout all this time, did Christina once incur the chance of finding herself alone with Lord Octavian. Occasionally, when his visits were paid to his sick wife's chamber, the nurse was absent—Zoe was unconscious of what was passing around her—and thus it may be said that he and Christina were virtually alone. But then she would sit on the opposite side of the couch from that where he placed himself; and half concealed by the curtain, she would not once meet his gaze. When he spoke to her—which was in the same manner of friendly courtesy as was formally wont to mark his bearing—she on her side responded with equal courtesy, but gave no encouragement for a protracted conversation.

Thus did the time pass; and on the twelfth day after the accident, the physician pronounced Lady Octavian Meredith to be out of danger. She now became conscious of what was passing around; and from the lips of both the physician and the nurse, she learnt how Christina had affectionately and tenderly ministered unto her during her severe illness. Indeed the medical man, who was generous-hearted and conscientious, hesitated not to give Zoe the assurance that she owed her life to Miss Ashton,—observing that though the physician may prescribe, and though the pecuniary position of the patient may be such as to ensure every comfort, yet that there is something which surpasses all professional skill and which no wealth can purchase—namely, the unwearied and tender ministration of a devoted friend. In Christina had Zoe possessed such a friend; and as the sick lady wound her arms about our heroine's neck, she murmuringly said, "Christina—dearest Christina, you have been to me as a sister. Oh, you know not how I love you!"

Let us suppose another fortnight passed. It was now verging towards the end of April; and on a bright beautiful day, Zoe was reclining upon the sofa in the drawing-room, enveloped in a wrapper—still pale and feeble—but completely out of danger, and with every prospect, according to the physician's declaration, of a speedy convalescence. One of the casements was open; and the genial air, in which the freshness of Spring mingled with the warmth of approaching Summer, was wafted into the room. Christina sat near the invalid: her cheeks were also pale—for she had not once issued from the dwelling since the return after the accident. Octavian was out; and the two young ladies were alone together.

A newspaper lay upon the table; and during a pause in the conversation—for Zoe was prohibited from speaking too much—Christina took up the journal. It was more a mechanical action than a voluntary one—for her thoughts were preoccupied: and in that same listless, unintentional manner her eyes moved slowly over the columns of the front page. But all in a moment something appeared to rivet her gaze and concentrate her thoughts: for she gave a start like that of one who suddenly discovers an object which has been sought after. Then she appeared to be studying with profound attention the particular passage, paragraph, or whatever it might be, which had thus so abruptly claimed her interest. Zoe—who had her regards settled in plaintive and tender contemplation of Christina's beautiful countenance—noticed that start, and observed likewise the deep study which followed it. A minute or two elapsed in continued silence; and then Zoe said in a soft gentle voice, "What is it, dear Christina, that so interests you?"

Our heroine again started, as if aroused from a reverie; and she flung a half-timid, half-deprecating look upon Lady Octavian Meredith, as if she feared for a moment to give such explanation as the question required. But then suddenly recovering her self-possession, she answered with a sweetness singularly blended with firmness, "Here is an eastern lady of rank who is advertising for a companion, who must possess certain qualifications, all of which are minutely specified."

"And wherefore, my dear Christina," inquired Zoe, a strange expression for a moment flitting over her countenance,—"why does that advertisement interest you so much?"

"Because—because, my dear friend—my kind benefactress—my own sweet Zoe," was Christina's tremulously given response, "the advertisement appears to suit me."

Lady Octavian Meredith did not immediately make any answer: she however gazed earnestly upon Christina's countenance, as if seeking to read into the very depths of her soul: but the amiable lady's regards were notwithstanding fraught with an ineffable sweetness and a tenderness that was at the same time full of affection, surprise, and suspense.

"And you will leave me, Christina?" she at length said, but in a voice so low that it was only audible through its tremulous clearness.

"Yes, dearest Zoe," answered Christina, "I shall seek this situation:"—and then she averted her countenance to conceal the tears that were trickling down it.

She said not another word: she volunteered not another syllable of explanation. What more indeed could she say? To enter into particulars was impossible; and she would much rather lie under the imputation of deep ingratitude—painful though such an imputation were—than be guilty of the far blacker and perhaps more hidden ingratitude of remaining beneath that roof to stand in the way of Zoe's claims to all her husband's devoted love.

There was a long silence, during which Christina dared not turn her eyes again upon Lady Octavian Meredith: for she naturally feared that this silence on her friend's part denoted astonishment and displeasure. At length feeling her position was awkward in the extreme, she slowly and timidly reverted her eyes upon Zoe; and then to her mingled amazement and relief, she perceived that Lady Octavian, having just wiped the tears from

her cheeks, was surveying her with an expression of tenderness ineffably sweet—indescribably angelic. Christina threw herself upon her friend's bosom: they embraced with true sisterly warmth: they mingled their tears together. For some minutes did they thus remain clasped in each other's arms; and not a syllable was spoken. Zoe was the first to break that silence at length; and then it was not to give utterance to a word of remonstrance against Christina's resolve—much less to breathe a syllable of reproach: it was merely to express the heartfelt prayer that her dear young friend would experience happiness wherever she might be.

Was it that Zoe penetrated Christina's motives, and that she esteemed them in the proper light,—appreciating them too with thankfulness? Such was the question which Christina naturally asked herself; and she knew not how to answer it. Very certain it was, however, that for the remainder of the time she stayed beneath that roof—which was now very short—she experienced nothing but the most sisterly kindness on the part of Zoe,—a kindness which she was never wearied of displaying, and which though mild, soft, and gentle, was all the more touching and profound. Our heroine applied to the Princess Indora—for she indeed was the Oriental lady advertising for a companion; and, furnished with a testimonial from Lady Octavian, she was readily accepted by the King of Inderabad's daughter.

It was on the third day after the scene above described between Christina and Zoe, that the former took her departure to remove to her new home. But since the accident she had not been once altogether alone with Lord Octavian; and inasmuch as when in his presence under any circumstances, her conversation was most guarded, she had not alluded in his hearing to this purposed removal. Whether Zoe had informed her husband or not, Christina was unaware. The young girl chose for her departure a moment when Lord Octavian was absent from the house; and on Zoe proffering the use of the carriage to take her to her destination, she declined it,—being determined that, unless from Zoe herself, the young nobleman should have no means of discovering whither she was gone. And something in her heart told her that Zoe had *not* spoken to her husband on the subject, and that she would *not* acquaint him with her new place of abode.

"Dearest Christina," said Lady Octavian, when the instant for parting arrived, "to you am I indebted for my life: my eternal gratitude and my heartfelt love are yours! Oh! believe me, dearest Christina, the feeling I cherish towards you, is—is——But I can say no more! God bless you, Christina! But we do not part for ever——No, no! I shall see you again, my sweetest, dearest friend: I shall visit you at the Princess's, if her Highness will permit it. Farewell, Christina—farewell!"

They embraced fervently: again and again did they embrace—the tears rained down their cheeks—one last kiss—one last farewell—and they separated!

CHAPTER XLIII.

INCIDENTS AT THE EARL OF LASCELLES' MANSION.

Now that the fine weather had set in, there was a particular room on the ground floor of the Earl of Lascelles' mansion, which the Countess Ethel seemed particularly to like. It was not large, but elegantly furnished; and, as her ladyship said, it had the finest piano of any apartment in the house. Adjoining this room was a bed-chamber, likewise so exquisitely appointed that it might serve as a lady's boudoir; and the windows of these apartments were on the side of the house, looking upon a grass plat dotted with parterres of flowers, and beyond which stretched a noble extent of garden.

For the last week or two the Countess of Lascelles had complained of indisposition,—representing that she was nervous, had sick head-aches, and was affected by the slightest noise. She had therefore begged the Earl to permit her to occupy these rooms for a brief space,—adding that she only thought thus of separating herself from him in order that she might recover her health all the more speedily; and as at the same time she made this request, she cajolingly desired him to send her the first proof-sheets of his memoirs to peruse—assuring him that she burned with impatience to become acquainted with a work that would astonish the world—the vain frivolous old man assented to the temporary separation of chambers.

Now it happened that one morning at about nine o'clock, the Earl made his way to the apartments which we have just been describing,—he having taken it into his head to relate to the Countess an adventure which he had never yet told her—and for the simple reason that he had only concocted it since six o'clock on that same morning, at which hour he had risen to prepare notes and memoranda to serve as a guide for his literary occupations by the time his secretary should arrive. Full of his newly concocted anecdote—to which he mentally added a few embellishing exaggerations as he threaded the passages towards the apartments above alluded to—the Earl reached the door; and without the ceremony of knocking, he walked in. Oh, incautious Ethel, to have left that door unlocked! It was a sad oversight: but if such oversights never took place, the chapters of romance would lose half their charm—actions for *crim. con.* much of their piquancy—and the public curiosity no mean portion of the food which occasionally gratifies it. The door was left unlocked, then; and as the Earl entered, he might have been knocked down with a straw—redoubtable, according to his own account, though he was—on beholding a female figure at the window half clasped in the arms of a young gentleman on the opposite side, and who seemed as if having just leapt out, he was taking a farewell kiss of the beauteous frail one.

That this latter was his wife and the other his son Lord Osmond, the Earl had not a doubt——though a sort of dimness immediately came over his vision. He stopped short—he tried to roar out something, but he could not: his powers

of utterance seemed suffocated. All that he could do, was to raise his clenched fist, and shake it in speechless, impotent rage:—then in total bewilderment he turned from the room, not thinking of closing the door behind him, and scarcely knowing whether he was walking on his head or his feet.

At that same instant Lord Osmond was stricken with dismay on catching a glimpse of his father's form ere it disappeared by the doorway. The Countess beheld the change which suddenly came over the young nobleman's countenance, and the abruptness too with which he retreated from her arms. She also was seized with consternation; and a few hurried words on Osmond's part confirmed all her worst and wildest fears. Good heavens! what was to be done? This was the question they both with simultaneous rapidity put mentally, and which the next moment they orally asked each other. Ethel was sinking with affright: visions of fearful exposure, of infamy and disgrace, were sweeping like vultures through her brain,—when Osmond, suddenly smitten with an idea, showed by the quick brightening-up of his countenance that all was not quite lost.

"What is it—what is it that you think of?" demanded Ethel, with the feverish haste of suspense.

"My father will be straight off to Makepeace—and that fellow can alone save us. Fear not, dearest, dearest Ethel!"

The lady staggered half fainting away from the window, and sank upon an ottoman; while her paramour, darting from the casement in another direction, sped in quest of Makepeace. Fortunately he encountered the valet at an angle of the building; and laying his hand upon his shoulder, he said in a quick excited tone, "Five hundred guineas if you will serve me!"

Now, as Makepeace was just the man to sell his soul to Satan for about half the sum, he was by no means the one likely to refuse such an offer as that which Lord Osmond thus made him. He accordingly returned an affirmative answer with the most zealous readiness; and Lord Osmond at once gave him the requisite explanations, vowing however that he was merely jestingly whispering something in the ear of his youthful mother-in-law, and that thus though his lips might seem suspiciously near to her countenance, it was only in the playful mood he had described, and not for the purpose of either receiving or bestowing an illicit caress. This was of course said to save Ethel's character in the estimation of the valet,—though Osmond might have known that the attempted explanation was far too clumsy to impose upon so astute an individual as Makepeace. The most intelligent persons however often stultify themselves in such peculiar circumstances, and hug the belief that the most transparent gloss thrown over particular incidents, serves as a successfully enshrouding veil. So was it with Lord Osmond on this occasion; and Makepeace affected to receive the young nobleman's explanations as the legitimate and veritable one. He bade Osmond be of good cheer, and hastened off to throw himself purposely in the Earl's way.

He knew perfectly well that the old nobleman would on his own side at once seek an opportunity of unbosoming his wrongs to him (Makepeace); and therefore he hurried up into the Earl's dressing-chamber,—where indeed at that hour in the morning it was his duty to lock up in the drawers all the cosmetics and the artificialities which played so considerable a part in the nobleman's toilet. On entering the room, Makepeace found that the Earl was not as yet there: but he knew that he *would* come—consequently he did not go to search for him in any other part of the mansion, but began putting away the divers articles above referred to. In a few minutes the door opened; and the Earl entering, flung himself upon a chair with a countenance so truly comical in its misery that it was difficult for Makepeace to suppress a smile. But with the air of one who seemed to fancy that nothing unusual had taken place, the valet went on with his work; while the old Earl sat literally gasping in continued bewilderment, as if still quite at a loss to persuade himself that what he had seen had positively and actually taken place.

"Makepeace," at length he said, "I do verily believe that I am—a—a——"

"I know that your lordship is the most enlightened nobleman of the age," observed the valet, with an air of profound respect.

"Yes, yes, Makepeace—I am aware that the world does entertain such an opinion of me. But that does not prevent me, all the same, from being a—a——"

"The most modest and unassuming nobleman, my lord, that could possibly be," rejoined the valet.

"Well, yes—I think that in this respect," said the old Earl, "I possess the qualities of all great minds. But still some of the greatest men that ever lived have been what I fear I am now. I mean a—a——"

"A little too diffident in respect to your lordship's own powers," interjected Makepeace, still with an air of respectful gravity the most complete and the most imperturbable. "For instance, your lordship might have been Prime Minister if your lordship had thought fit to take advantage of the occasion when you made that wonderful speech——"

"Well, I think I was rather forbearing at the time," said the Earl: "but I did not like to be too hard upon the government, and oust them completely. But I feel very queer, Makepeace—very funny indeed. I could not have believed that such was the sensation when a man finds himself out to be a—a——"

"Popular author—as your lordship will assuredly become," said Makepeace. "It is already whispered abroad that your lordship has got a work in the press; and I know it is creating an immense sensation: for when I went to the circulating library yesterday to fetch your lordship Gulliver's and Baron Munchausen's Travels——"

"Yes, yes—I just wanted to look at the books you name, to see how the tremendous falsehoods those fellows have recorded, stand in sad contrast with the adventures, so startling though so truthful, which I am chronicling. But I never thought, Makepeace, that I should have to wind up my book by writing myself down—not an ass, Makepeace, as Dogberry did — but a — a——"

"Traveller of the most unimpeachable veracity," rejoined the valet: and now there was really something so exceedingly ludicrous in his master's

countenance,—his sense of degradation struggling with his pride—the conviction of a sustained, wrong yearning to proclaim itself, but held back by the shame of declaring what he felt himself to be,—all these feelings finding such comical expression in features whose aspect was at the best of times most ludicrous, that the valet never experienced such difficulty in keeping his countenance.

"It's all very well that I am everything you say," continued the Earl, with unusual pettishness—for never was his idea of his own greatness so cruelly shocked, or brought down to a level so closely bordering on a sense of abject littleness: "but it does not prevent me from being, Makepeace — eh, Makepeace? — you know what I mean——a—a——" and then with a desperate effort, and before the valet could interject another complimentary phrase, the Earl blurted forth—"a cuckold!"

Makepeace started with an astonishment so admirably feigned that his master believed it to be perfectly genuine; and for nearly a minute they gazed upon each other,—the valet as if in speechless amazement, the Earl with a grin that was most ludicrously doleful.

"My lord," at length said the valet, "there must be some terrible mistake in all this. What! the Countess forget her duty to her husband!—and such a husband!—a husband who is in all respects one in ten thousand! Surely your lordship is labouring under a delusion?"

"Well, I don't know, Makepeace. It's true I've seen strange things in my time. There was the spectre of the Hartz mountain—I nodded familiarly to him: but he took his hat right off to me."

"A homage to your lordship's rare qualities," said the valet.

"Well—and then there was the mirage, too," continued the nobleman. "I was once riding on an elephant in Africa; and in the horizon which bounded the desert, I beheld the reflection—but with this simple difference, that the elephant was riding on me."

"Emblematical of your lordship's great bodily strength," interjected Makepeace.

"Well, they were optical delusions, after all," said the Earl: "but really, when one sees a young gentleman kissing a young lady, it is difficult—eh, Makepeace?—to persuade oneself that *that* is an optical delusion."

"And yet, my lord—with due deference to your superior understanding," replied the valet, "there might be an optical delusion on such a point as even this. Indeed, when I bethink me, I just now saw something that might serve as an illustration—if I dare introduce such names in connexion with such a matter——"

"Speak out, Makepeace," said the Earl, fidgetting about on his seat: "though I tell you it will be no easy thing to persuade me that I am not—you know what I mean. But about this illustration of yours?"

"It is simply this, my lord," resumed the valet. "Just now, when your lordship descended from the dressing-room, I went into the garden to pick a flower or two for my own chamber——I am very fond of flowers, my lord——when I beheld Lord Osmond——"

"Ah, Lord Osmond!" muttered the Earl, grinding his false teeth and clenching his fist. "My own son—the villain!"

But Makepeace, as if not noticing the interruption, went on to say, "I beheld Lord Osmond laughing gaily with Miss Vincent; and she too was laughing heartily — evidently at something which he had just been saying to her. Well, my lord, just at that moment the Countess appeared at the window of her own room; and her ladyship gaily exclaimed, 'What lovers' secret is this passing between you?'"

"She said that—did she?" cried the old nobleman eagerly, and quivering with suspense.

"Yes, my lord—that is what the Countess said; and she appeared to enjoy amazingly the confusion into which her sudden appearance at the casement had thrown Lord Osmond and Miss Vincent. Then Miss Vincent, with many blushes, said to Lord Osmond, 'Do pray, my dear Adolphus, tell the Countess what it is we were saying.' You will pardon me, my lord, for being so explicit——"

"Yes, yes—go on, go on!" said the Earl, catching eagerly at the hope of finding himself no cuckold after all.

"Well, my lord, the rest is soon told," continued Makepeace. "Lord Osmond rushed up to the window, while Miss Vincent stood blushingly aside; and he forthwith whispered the secret in the ears of the Countess. Now, my lord, what I mean to infer from all this is, that suppose any one had been near enough at the time to see merely Lord Osmond and her ladyship under those circumstances, and yet too remote to have overheard what previously took place—the impression might have been very detrimental indeed——"

"By heaven!" shouted the old Earl, "I am no cuckold after all!"—and springing up from his chair, he began dancing and capering about the room, performing the most extraordinary antics and throwing his body into the most grotesque contortions. "Why, do you know, Makepeace," he ejaculated, when it at length pleased him to desist from those demonstrations which however interesting as an expression of feeling, were certainly somewhat uncouth if regarded in the light of attempts to exhibit the twistings and twirlings which the human limbs can achieve, and to display how the human frame can become as circumvolved as a corkscrew,—"do you know, Makepeace, that it is the very incident you have been so innocently describing, which put such a dreadful idea into my head? And yet I now see it all! It was an optical delusion——yes, and an auricular delusion also: for would you believe it, Makepeace, that I could have not only sworn I saw the kisses but likewise heard them?"

"It shows, my lord, how even the most intelligent can deceive themselves," said the valet gravely.

"It does indeed! But what a fortunate thing I did not give way to my rage! I would not for the world have exposed myself so foolishly."

"It would indeed, my lord, have been a very sad business," rejoined Makepeace.

"Yes—and what would the Countess have thought of me?" exclaimed the old nobleman. "You see, Makepeace, what extraordinary com-

mand I have over my temper. There is not another man in England that could have so restrained himself. But I am exceedingly cool and collected in emergencies. I remember once when I was first in the commission of the peace——it was down in the country that the thing happened——I was called upon to stop a prize-fight that was taking place. I proceeded to the spot, and saw two great hulking fellows—each at least six feet high, and with fists that could fell an ox—fighting in the midst of a ring. Well, Makepeace, I did not rush in to part them—I let them go on fighting——"

"Which proves, my lord," responded the valet, "that your lordship does indeed possess an extraordinary degree of coolness."

"And never did I display it more completely than just now. Of course, Makepeace, you will not mention to a soul that such a thing ever entered into my head? Ah! and Adolphus and Isabella have got on so well together that they are regular lovers—eh? Capital! capital!"—and the old Earl, chuckling at the idea, rubbed his hands gleefully: for though his suspicion was fully removed, yet some how or another he was very anxious that Lord Osmond should wed with all possible despatch and bear his bride away to another home. "I tell you what, Makepeace—it is quite evident that my son and niece are immensely attached to each other; so we must marry them off as soon as possible. But young people are so diffident—they take months and months before they dare speak of settling the wedding-day. I know it was the case with me when I fell in love with my present Countess. I was exceedingly diffident——and then too, you know, I had that long attack of the gout which chained me to my room for three months. But about this young couple——I will do something to make Adolphus hurry matters on apace. Ah! the idea strikes me—and you will confess, Makepeace, when you hear it, that it is an admirable stroke of policy."

"I have no doubt of it, my lord," said the valet: "everything your lordship does, is impressed with a high intelligence."

"Well, I think that you are about right there, Makepeace," said the old Earl, complacently. "And now I will tell you what I propose to do. That Christian Ashton is a very nice lad—and so genteel too in his manners—indeed quite the gentleman——"

"He could scarcely be otherwise," observed Makepeace, "after being a month in your lordship's employment."

"Yes—gentility reflects itself. But about my plan—I propose to throw him in Isabella's way: I will invite him to dinner—I will leave Adolphus to hand down the Countess from the drawing-room, so that young Ashton must give his arm to Miss Vincent—and then he will sit next to her at table. Perhaps I will drop him a hint that he is to pay her attention——he is so docile and obliging, he does everything I tell him. For instance yesterday he wanted to spell *shrubbery* with two b's: but I bade him put only one, and he obeyed me immediately—with such a pleasant smile too! —so that I am sure he will do what I tell him in the present case. His attentions will be flattering to Isabella; for all young girls are coquettishly inclined—just as young men like me are apt to be rakish. However, as I was saying, Isabella will be pleased—Adolphus will be jealous—and he will be urged on to ask his cousin to name the day. Now, what do you think of my scheme, Makepeace?"

"I think your lordship possesses the wisdom of Solomon," answered the valet.

"Well, I believe that you do not exactly stand alone in that opinion. But now I will just run and ask the Countess how she is to-day: for I am prouder and fonder of her than ever, after having so shamefully suspected her."

Away sped the old Earl to Ethel's apartments; and the moment he made his appearance, she saw that Lord Osmond's device, practised through the medium of Makepeace, had completely succeeded; and she was infinitely relieved by a result which she had scarcely dared hope would have been attained. Alas, we are bound to declare that Ethel was guilty! Those fine resolves which some mouths back she had adopted—and at first too with a prospect of really having strength of mind sufficient to carry them out—had gradually melted away beneath the influence of Lord Osmond's tender looks, of his impassioned language, and of his great personal beauty, since the young nobleman had contrived to obtain admission once more into the paternal mansion. Yes—Ethel had fallen: but we choose not to dwell at unnecessary length upon guilt which under all circumstances was so deep—so deadly!

The silly old Earl lost no time in putting his precious scheme into execution. Christian came at the usual time that day; and having written to his noble employer's dictation for three or four hours—and an astounding admixture of mendacity, self-conceit, and nonsense it was that he had thus to write—he was about to depart, when the Earl caught him by the arm, and addressed him as follows:—

"You are a very good youth—and I am very much attached to you: but you must not put two b's in *shrubbery* for the future. You are to dine with me to-day. Make yourself look as spruce as possible—and come at six o'clock. There will only be ourselves, the Countess, Lord Osmond, and my niece: make yourself quite at home, and don't hesitate to pay such little attentions to Miss Vincent as a young gentleman is bound to show towards a young lady. Why, God bless me, how crimson you turn!—you blush just like a woman! Pooh! no diffidence! Mind you hand Isabella down to dinner—sit next to her—and talk without restraint. And now go; for I mean to sit down for an hour or two and invent——I mean make notes of some more adventures for our occupation to-morrow."

Christian went away astounded—as well indeed he might be. What could it possibly all mean? Had the old lord suspected his passion for the beautiful Isabella? did he suspect likewise that his nicce had not regarded the youth with indifference? —did he purpose to favour their loves? or was he adopting some means to inflict a crushing punishment, and overwhelm our presumptuous hero with the most humiliating exposure? But no: Christian could not fancy that this latter conjecture was the solution of the mystery. He had seen quite enough of the Earl's character to be aware that he was incapable of any proceeding that had

aught grand or striking in it: and moreover, that if he meditated mischief, he was unable to conceal the pettiness of his mind beneath an air of frank cordiality and kindness.

"However," thought Christian to himself, "no matter what his lordship's motives are, let me think only of the joy afforded by this prospect of passing hours in the society of Isabella!"

We must observe that Christian had no longer the slightest jealousy in respect to Lord Osmond. He had often noticed the young nobleman, the Countess, and Isabella walking together in the grounds; and had invariably seen that while Osmond and Ethel kept together, Isabella would either linger behind, or else walk by the side of the Countess and not by that of her cousin Adolphus. Thus, although Christian felt tolerably well certain that Lord Osmond was not thinking of paying his addresses to Isabella,—yet on the other hand his naturally pure mind suspected not for an instant the criminal intimacy which subsisted between that young nobleman and his beauteous mother-in-law. We may here observe too that Isabella—even more femininely chaste-souled than one of the opposite sex could possibly be—was equally far from imagining that an unholy passion subsisted on the part of her uncle's wife and son.

Two or three weeks more passed away; and during this interval Christian frequently dined at the Earl's table. Lord Osmond and the Countess were perfectly well aware of the motive for which he was thus brought into their society, and treated as an equal in the little family circle: for Makepeace, whom the five hundred guineas had bought entirely over to Lord Osmond's interest, had failed not to inform the young nobleman of his father's delectable scheme. Isabella imagined that her uncle was merely displaying these civilities towards Christian in consequence of a disinterested esteem for the youth's merits: while Christian himself continued as much in the dark as ever in respect to the whole proceeding on the part of his noble employer.

CHAPTER XLIV.

YOUTHFUL LOVE.

It was a serene but profound happiness which the youthful lovers now enjoyed—for lovers they assuredly were, although as yet no syllable from our young hero's lip had revealed the affection which he experienced. But the eyes speak a language more eloquent than that of the tongue; and the sympathies of two hearts, pouring forth in reciprocal transfusion—gentle and unseen—make mutual revelations which are not to be mistaken. When hand touches hand and the pulses of the two beat quicker—when the gaze of the lover settles in respectful tenderness and bashful admiration upon the countenance of the adored one, as if his eyes would penetrate through the mirror of her own orbs, deep down into her heart's tabernacle and feast their looks upon the hived sweetness of her own pure love—and when her eyes, modestly sinking beneath that gaze, veil themselves with the richly fringed lids,—then is love's tale told on the one hand and understood on the other,—reciprocated too as well as understood, though not a syllable from the lips may pass between the enamoured pair. Thus was it with Christian Ashton and Isabella Vincent.

In the presence of the Earl, Lord Osmond and the Countess were exceedingly upon their guard; and as the young nobleman had every reason to be rejoiced that Christian was now so much brought within the sphere of the family circle, he had not the slightest notion of interfering in respect to the loves of the youth and Isabella. For that such an affection subsisted between them, was visible enough to any eyes save those of the foolish old Earl. Christian joined them in their rambles in the garden; and as he walked with Isabella, it necessarily threw the Countess and Adolphus together without the risk of exciting any suspicion on the part of the younger pair as to the illicit intimacy existing between them. Thus was it that both Lord Osmond and the Countess had every reason to be pleased that Christian was so much at the house; and for the same motive the young nobleman did not choose to pay any marked attention to Isabella, even though by so doing he might the more effectually have lulled the Earl into complete security in respect to the Countess.

One day Miss Vincent was to be presented at Court at one of the Royal drawing-rooms. The Countess of Lascelles, as a peeress, was to introduce the young lady: but when the appointed day came, she was really indisposed and unable to leave the house. Isabella's naturally retiring disposition would have shrunk from this ceremony which to her had the aspect of an unpleasant ordeal: but it was a whim of her uncle's, and therefore must be gratified. He was resolved that the presentation should take place: and therefore as the Countess could not assist in it, the Earl speedily enlisted the services of two titled ladies of his acquaintance. The fact is, the old nobleman was getting wearied of his son's delay—as he thought it—in openly proposing for Isabella's hand; and therefore he was resolved to accomplish another of his fine strokes of policy. He fancied that if Isabella were seen apparelled with all the elegance, taste, and richness which were inseparable from Court costume, her appearance would be so ravishing that Adolphus could not possibly for another moment resist beseeching her to name the nuptial day.

And truly beautiful indeed was Isabella Vincent on this occasion. Her glossy dark brown hair, showering in ringlets upon her shoulders of dazzling whiteness, was decorated with a single white camelia—a fitting emblem of her own immaculate purity. The dress that she wore—combining the necessary attributes above specified—set off her tall, slender, sylphide shape to the utmost advantage: while the fear that she might not acquit herself properly, heightened the colour upon her cheeks, which made her seem the fairest image of modest loveliness that ever mortal eye rested upon. And to Court Isabella went: but while proceeding thither in the carriage with her lady-chaperons—while ascending the staircase at the palace, in the midst of a throng of all that was highest in rank, most brilliant in beauty, and most eminent in respect to State dignitaries—while passing through the splendid saloons—while

kneeling to kiss the hand of Royalty—and while returning again to the mansion at Kensington,—there was *one* image which was never absent from the charming maiden's mind——and this was the image of Christian Ashton.

The Earl of Lascelles was again completely out in his reckoning. Lord Osmond was too deeply enamoured of the Countess to be affected with the charms of any other being in feminine shape, no matter how transcendingly lovely were the aspect which this being wore. But how was it with Christian Ashton? He beheld Isabella pass out of the carriage when going, and alight from it on her return; and never in his eyes had she appeared so fascinating—so sweetly beautiful—so matchlessly charming. He knew that she loved him: but yet he felt that to complete his happiness, he must obtain the avowal from her lips. At once did he take the resolve to seize the first opportunity to confess his passion and elicit a reciprocal tale from her. But the next moment a feeling of sadness came over him:—how dared he aspire to the hand of an Earl's niece? and how could he ever hope to be in a position to make her his wife? This very circumstance of her presentation at Court was a source of pleasure and pain to our young hero,—of pleasure inasmuch as it enabled him to behold Isabella apparelled in a way to set off her loveliness to its utmost advantage—and of pain because it forced upon him the conviction that situated as he was, it seemed presumptuous to a degree, if not absolutely hopeless, for him to aspire to the hand of one who belonged to the circle of Aristocracy and was enabled to enter within that of Royalty.

And this strain of thought led him on to reflect for the hundredth—perhaps the thousandth time, on those mysterious circumstances which had recently enveloped Isabella as with a veil of mystery. From being ignored by her relatives, she was suddenly transferred into their very midst: from occupying a humble lodging in the house of coarse vulgar people, she was all in a moment removed to a palatial mansion. What could be the signification of all this?—wherefore had Makepeace assumed the name of Gibson when calling at the Chubbs' to liquidate the stipend for Isabella's board? Christian was bewildered: he knew not what to conjecture—what to surmise. When walking with Isabella in the grounds, and when having the opportunity of private conversation, he had not ventured to touch upon those subjects: nor had she of her own accord ever in the slightest way alluded to them.

But from the contemplation of these mysteries, Christian's mind reverted to that of Isabella's loveliness, the amiability of her disposition, and the elegant sweetness of her manners. Despondency on account of the difference of their social positions, was again succeeded by hope: and again too did the determination settle in his mind that he would seek an opportunity to avow his love and to elicit a reciprocal confession from her own lips.

That opportunity presented itself in the evening after Isabella's return from Court. Christian was invited to dinner at the Earl's mansion; and after the dessert, Lord Osmond proposed a stroll in the garden. The Earl refused to be of the party: for he was inwardly chuckling at the idea that his last grand stroke of policy was producing its effect, and that Isabella's appearance of that day was now certain to elicit something decisive from his son's lips towards her:—hence his refusal to join the party; for he concluded that Adolphus would take care to stray apart with Isabella, while Christian kept the Countess company. So the Earl sat over his wine,—partly chuckling at what he fancied was going on—and partly sketching forth in his imagination some astounding adventure for the literary lucubrations of the morrow.

Little did he suspect that while Lord Osmond and the Countess were seated together with hands fondly clasped, in an arbour situated in the most secluded part of the grounds, Christian and Isabella were walking in a shady avenue quite on the other side of the enclosure. And Christian told the tale which he had resolved to tell—and obtained the avowal which he had hoped to elicit. The hearts of that young pair were confessed the one to the other: and both were happy. Would the reader have us enter into the minutest details, and chronicle every word that passed between them?—would he have us extend our narrative into the fullest particulars descriptive of this love scene? And yet we might do so: for though the tale of love is the oldest known to human beings, and commenced in Paradise itself before the Fall,—yet is it ever new, and therefore ever interesting. The forms of speech which convey it, may be infinitely varied—yet are the end and purpose ever the same; and countless though the world's languages be—different too in the richness or the poverty of idioms, figures, and phrases,—yet have they each and all a sufficiency—aye, even a copiousness of words wherewith to form that tale.

But it is *not* our purpose to record the conversation which then took place between Christian and Isabella. Suffice it to say that after hesitating, and trembling, and falling into confusion,—the youth, in the very midst of his bewilderment, at length found himself breathing the avowal which he had so much longed to make; and in Isabella's blushing cheeks and downcast looks, he read the response long ere it was softly murmured from her lips. Then they were happy both—Oh, so happy!—joy beating in their hearts, and their hands thrilling to each other's touch. The maiden spoke but little—the youth not much more—when once the reciprocal avowals were made; and the little that they did say, was connected only with their love: they spoke not of the future—they thought not of how the hope which was in their hearts was ever to be realised: it was sufficient for them that they loved each other, and that for the present they were together!

It was not until the following day that Christian ventured to speak to Isabella relative to those mysteries which had surrounded her at the time of their first acquaintance at the parish clerk's house: and now it was that our young hero received the following narrative from Miss Vincent's lips:—

"My mother, Lady Isabella, was the sister of the Earl of Lascelles, and many years younger than himself. Were she alive now, she would be scarcely forty. She was young therefore when she first learnt to love my father, Mr. Vincent, who was only a poor lieutenant in the army. But though poor in respect to the world's goods, he was rich in every intellectual accomplishment and generous quality of the heart. Lady Isabella, who

had long been an orphan, did not reside with her brother the Earl—but with a maiden aunt in the country. This aunt was proud, harsh, and severe; and the moment she perceived that a feeling of affection was springing up between her niece and Lieutenant Vincent, she unceremoniously and rudely forbade the latter her house. At the same time she wrote to the Earl of Lascelles, who was in London,—informing him that his sister had fallen in love with a penniless officer, and that he had better come and fetch her away at once. The Earl did so; and when he had his sister with him in the metropolis, he insisted that she should receive the addresses of a particular friend of his own—a nobleman of rank and wealth, but who was old enough to be Lady Isabella's father. Vainly did my poor mother beseech that her brother would not sacrifice her so cruelly: he was inexorable—and perhaps you have already seen enough of my uncle, to be aware that whatever idea, whim, or caprice he takes into his head, *must* be gratified. Perhaps he thought that he was only doing a brother's duty towards a young orphan sister: perhaps his motives were good, since his aim was to secure for her a prosperous position. At all events, as I have said, he remained deaf to her entreaties; and matters progressed so far that the day was fixed for her elderly suitor to conduct her to the altar. At that crisis Mr. Vincent arrived in London on a temporary leave of absence from his regiment in the provincial town: he and Lady Isabella met—and they resolved to part no more. She fled with him to the dwelling of a female relation of his own; and so soon as circumstances would permit, their hands were united. Alas, my poor mother!—she found herself discarded by all her relations—even by her own brother: but she had a consolation in my father's devoted love."

Here Isabella paused for a few minutes, during

which she wiped away the tears which the recital of her parent's history drew from her eyes: and Christian, taking her hand, pressed it tenderly.

"I do not remember my father," continued the young maiden, in a soft plaintive voice: "he died when I was only three years old. You may easily suppose that the widow of a lieutenant in the army did not find herself very happily placed in a pecuniary sense. It was for my sake—for the sake of her orphan child—that she wrote imploring letters to her aunt and her brother, beseeching their forgiveness and their succour. I regret to say that so far as forgiveness was concerned, their hearts were closed against her: but her brother the Earl consented to make her an allowance of three hundred pounds a-year. This was at least some consolation to my poor mother: for she knew that her child whom she loved so tenderly, would be beyond the reach of want, and that she would likewise be enabled to give me a good education. It was in Lincolnshire that my father died; and it was there that my mother continued to dwell. I was educated, until the age of fourteen, under her immediate supervision: she would not send me to a boarding-school—she could not consent to separate even for a single day from the only joy of her heart! It was when I had obtained that age of fourteen, that this fond and affectionate parent of mine was seized with an illness which speedily threatened to prove fatal. Ah, Christian!" continued Isabella, in a voice so low and tremulous that it was scarcely audible; "never, never can I forget the scene at my mother's death-bed! It often steals upon me during the day—and comes back to me in dreams by night: methinks that I feel the last fond pressure of her arms now around my neck—the last kisses she imprinted upon my cheeks—and the tears too which bathed these cheeks of mine! Then it was that she told me her own past history; and amidst convulsing sobs informed me that I should be left in the world dependent upon an uncle whom I had never seen. But I must observe that when her indisposition had first threatened grave consequences, she had written to the Earl of Lascelles, imploring him to send her the assurance that her daughter—so soon to become an orphan—would not be neglected. The Earl wrote back to say he would look after my welfare; and thus my poor mother's death-bed was not one of unmitigated affliction: she had still the hope that her brother's promise would be fulfilled on behalf of myself. And while breathing this hope, and invoking heaven's choicest blessings upon my head, that dear mother of mine surrendered up her spirit into the hands of the Eternal!"

Here Isabella again paused; and Christian gently said, "Do not continue your narrative now: it afflicts you too much."

"Yes—I will complete it, Christian," she answered: "for it is a tale which must be some day told to your ears. You may well conceive that the task is a painful one; but being entered upon, it is better to achieve it than to be compelled to renew it at a future period."

Christian recognised the truth of the sweet maiden's remarks; and she continued in the following manner:—

"I wrote to my uncle the Earl of Lascelles, to inform him of my poor mother's death: he remitted me money, and bade me, when the funeral was over, come up to London, where he had secured me a home beneath the roof of a highly respectable family, whom he named. Conceive my distress when I thus learnt that I was an object of no sympathy with my titled relative—but merely a being for whom he felt himself bound to make an eleemosynary provision so that I should not starve! Instead of hastening in person to bestow a paternal protection on the poor orphan of so tender an age, he bade me journey up to London by myself: I was not even to find a home beneath his own roof—but was to be consigned to the care of strangers. Ah! Christian! my first experience of the world was thus sad enough."

"Do not weep, sweetest Isabella!" whispered our young hero, as he now pressed her hand to his lips. "Fortune's aspect has changed towards you—and you are differently situated now."

Isabella threw upon her lover a look of bashful tenderness; and she continued her narrative.

"I arrived in London—and proceeded at once to the house of the Rev. Mr. Hickman—by whom, as well as by the ladies of his family, I was kindly received. Mrs. Hickman took an early opportunity to make me understand that in conversation before strangers I was not to claim relationship with the Earl of Lascelles, nor on any account was I to speak of the circumstances of my mother's history."

"Doubtless the Earl was somewhat ashamed of his conduct towards his deceased sister?" remarked Christian: "and hence that injunction of secrecy and silence conveyed through the medium of those to whose care he had entrusted you."

"That was the conjecture which I also formed at the time," rejoined Isabella; "and I have no doubt it was the true one. I remained in the Rev. Mr. Hickman's family for nearly two years,—during which I was well treated; and as Mr. Hickman had daughters of my own age, and a governess to instruct them, my education was completed under the same tutelage. But Mr. Hickman died suddenly; and as he left his family but indifferently provided for, they had to go abroad, to accept a home that was offered them at the house of Mrs. Hickman's brother, who was a merchant or banker—I know not exactly which—residing on the Continent. The departure took place hurriedly after the funeral; and as I could not of course accompany them under such circumstances, it became necessary to find me another home. That was the first occasion on which I ever beheld the person who then called himself Mr. Gibson. He informed me that he was the Earl of Lascelles' confidential agent, and that he was empowered to provide for me temporarily, until my uncle should make up his mind in respect to other arrangements. Everything was done in a hurry; and by Mrs. Hickman's recommendation, a lodging was procured for me in the house of her deceased husband's clerk—where, Christian," added Isabella, with a soft blush, "we first met."

There was another pressure of the hand on the part of the enamoured youth; and he observed, "But the change from a residence with a genteel family to the abode of those coarse vulgar people——"

"I do not think it was altogether my uncle's fault," interrupted Isabella: "and I will presently

explain wherefore. First of all I must tell you that the Earl's valet—whom I then knew only by the name of Gibson—repeated the injunction which I had originally received from Mrs. Hickman,—to the effect that I was never in my new home to make the slightest allusion to the Earl of Lascelles—never to speak of him as my uncle—never to mention that my deceased mother had belonged to a noble and titled family. He also informed me that I must on no account form any new acquaintances. Indeed, Makepeace spoke far more plainly on these subjects, and therefore less delicately, than Mrs. Hickman had formerly done: for he gave me to understand that if I violated his injunction—if I spoke of my uncle either in language of boasting or complaint—his lordship would abandon me altogether, and withdraw whatsoever he purposed to allow for my support."

"Ah, this was most cruel!" exclaimed Christian, his blood tingling with indignation: and he thought to himself that he should never again be able to endure the old Earl's presence with even an ordinary degree of patience.

"Yes—it was cruel," said Isabella: "for if my poor mother had mortally offended her relatives, it was not well for them to visit their rancour upon the head of her orphan daughter. However, I accepted my destiny with resignation: I promised to obey the injunction so earnestly given;—and now, Christian, you can comprehend wherefore it was that when you so kindly offered that your sister should pay me a visit, I was compelled to refuse—and yet I could give you no explanations! I need not speak of my experiences of Mr. and Mrs. Chubb: you know them—and you saw enough to be well aware that I could not possibly be happy beneath their roof. When Makepeace called——"

"And why, do you suppose, did he take an assumed name?" inquired Christian.

"Doubtless to render it all the more difficult—and indeed impossible—for the Chubbs to discover by whom he was employed. But as I was about to observe," continued the amiable Miss Vincent, "I occasionally asked him, when he called at the house, and I had an opportunity of speaking to him in private, whether my uncle intended me to live there altogether?—and he invariably replied that when his lordship had time to give his attention to the matter, some other arrangements should be made and something fixed with regard to my future career. Indeed, Makepeace hinted that it was possible a situation as governess, or as companion to a lady, would be found for me—and that therefore it was not worth while to remove me to any other place at present. Then, all of a sudden was I informed that my uncle had altered his mind entirely concerning me—that he meant to have me home—to acknowledge me as his niece—and to receive me with open arms. You know how abruptly I was borne away from beneath that roof where we first became acquainted. I must now add that on the morning after my arrival at this mansion, Makepeace—whose real name I had of course by that time discovered—sought an opportunity of speaking to me alone. He expressed a hope that I had always found his conduct perfectly respectful towards me; and he further hinted that it would be doing him a service if I did not mention to my uncle how meanly and humbly I was provided for at the parish-clerk's house. I had no inclination to commence my new career beneath the Earl's roof by making mischief, or vexing my uncle with complaints; and I therefore gave the assurance which set his mind at ease. But I suffered him to understand that I penetrated his motive in making the request,—and that though I pardoned him, I did not the less despise him."

"Ah, I comprehend," exclaimed Christian, indignantly: "the unscrupulous man had paid but a mere pittance on your behalf to the Chubbs', and self-appropriated the remainder of the allowance furnished from the Earl's purse!"

"There can be no doubt, Christian," answered Isabella, "that such was the conduct of Makepeace; and you understand wherefore I just now expressed my belief that the change from a comfortable home at the Hickmans' to a comparatively wretched one beneath the parish-clerk's roof, was not to be altogether ascribed to any unfeeling conduct on my uncle's part. And it is with pleasure I add that from the moment I set foot within these walls, I have received nothing but kindness at the hands of the amiable Countess: my cousin Adolphus treats me, as you see, with an attention courteously respectful: the Earl himself appears glad to have me with him—and in no sense have I been made to feel that I am in a state of dependence—much less that I am an interloper."

Thus terminated the young maiden's narrative; and as the dusk was now closing in, the two youthful lovers sought Lord Osmond and the Countess, that they might re-enter the mansion together. Those whom they thus sought, had likewise deemed it time to rejoin the Earl; and the party accordingly repaired to the drawing-room.

Two or three days elapsed; and still the Earl of Lascelles heard nothing of the hoped-for intimation that his son Adolphus had proposed for the hand of Miss Vincent. His lordship began to fear that his fine stroke of policy in respect to Isabella's presentation at Court, had failed to produce the desired effect upon Adolphus; and he was determined to bring matters to a solution and pack off Lord Osmond and Isabella to the hymeneal altar with the least possible delay. He therefore reflected upon what new step he should now take in order to bring about this consummation. He still felt persuaded that it could be nothing but diffidence on his son's part; and the current of his thoughts flowed in the following channel:—

"Perhaps, after all, the loves of my son and my niece have not made quite so much progress as I had anticipated. And really, considering that Adolphus is but a mere child,"—for the Earl would not even admit to himself that his son was a grown-up young man of three-and-twenty,—"he may be a mere puling schoolboy in the art of love. I will just satisfy myself on the point. I will ask that young Ashton to dine with us again to-day: they are all sure to walk out in the garden as usual in the evening—Ashton will of course bear the Countess company—Adolphus will roam apart with his cousin Isabella—and I will conceal myself amongst the evergreens, and just listen to what takes place between the young couple. They will of course talk of love; and I shall be enabled to judge to what point matters have reached,—

whether there is any chance of Adolphus soon popping the question—or whether he is so timid and bashful that he wants me to give him a helping hand."

The old Earl chuckled amazingly at this new scheme: he considered it to be another brilliant stroke of policy on his part;—but for a wonder he did not communicate it to Makepeace. He invited Christian to dine at his table that day; and every thing progressed as he could wish: for after the dessert, the usual walk in the garden was proposed, though at a somewhat later hour than heretofore. The Earl excused himself, as was his wont; and for about half-an-hour he sat drinking his wine and pondering the various matters he had in hand,—not forgetting his literary labours, which were progressing as rapidly as his own fertile imagination and Christian's fluent penmanship could possibly enable them to do.

The half-hour having elapsed, and the dusk coming on, the Earl of Lascelles issued from the mansion—struck into the shadiest avenue—and proceeding stealthily, came near one of the arbours which were interspersed about the grounds. He thought he heard voices speaking in gentle tones: he stopped and listened—he recognised Isabella's voice—but could not catch what she was saying. Noiselessly, as a serpent gliding amongst the trees and shrubs, did the Earl steal to the rear of that arbour; and there, inwardly chuckling at his astuteness and his cunning policy, he listened. The voices continued speaking in the same low tone as before; and love was assuredly the topic of their discourse. But gradually the suspicion stole into the Earl's mind that it was not precisely the voice of his son Adolphus which he heard in conversation with his beautiful niece. His lordship continued to listen with suspended breath, until he could no longer conceal from himself the suspicion—almost amounting to a conviction—that it was none other than Christian Ashton whom he thus heard in tender discourse with Isabella. The Earl was amazed—bewildered—petrified: he felt as if he were in a dream; and none of the fictitious adventures in his own forthcoming volumes, seemed half so marvellous as this reality. Whether he was standing on his head or his heels, the old nobleman had not a very clear conception. At length, as he began to awaken somewhat from his astoundment, he resolved to have ocular demonstration of the fact itself ere he proclaimed his presence: for the "optical delusion" in respect to his wife some weeks back, had made him particularly cautious how he took any rash step for the future.

Therefore, still as noiselessly as a serpent, did the Earl creep along round the arbour,—until he was close by the entrance of that dense umbrageous bower. It was now almost completely dusk; and the Earl, gently protruding his head, looked in. The lovers both at the same instant caught sight of a face thus peeping upon them through the obscurity: but they did not recognise it. Isabella gave a faint scream; and Christian—smitten with the conviction that it was a piece of impertinent curiosity on the part of the gardener whom he had a little while back seen in the grounds—darted forward and dealt the countenance such a vigorous blow that he sent the unfortunate old Earl sprawling back into the midst of a group of sweetbriar shrubs.

His lordship roared out with the pain: as well indeed he might—for the thorns had entered his person in all directions; and as he had a pair of light trousers on, it was particularly in the lower limbs that he suffered. Christian and Isabella at once comprehended that it was none other than the Earl himself who was the victim of this catastrophe. The young maiden was overwhelmed with confusion and dismay: the youth sprang forward to drag his lordship forth from the briars; and Lord Osmond at that moment rushed up to the spot. Hearing his father's cries, Adolphus had fancied there was something wrong; and he had accordingly urged the Countess to return to the mansion while he sped to see what was the matter.

"I am murdered, Adolphus!" exclaimed the Earl in a towering rage: "this young rascal has vowed to have my life——and he has been making love to your cousin Bella!"

"Most sincerely and humbly do I beseech your lordship's pardon," said Christian, "for the blow which I inflicted——"

"But my nose!" cried the Earl, rubbing his nasal promontory in a most ludicrous manner. "Be off with you, sir!—get out of my sight!—never cross my threshold again!—and whatever is due to you shall be forwarded to your lodging in the morning."

"I hope, my dear father," interposed Lord Osmond, "that you will deal leniently——"

"What! with this nose of mine all swollen and puffed up!—my good looks spoilt!" vociferated the Earl. "Where is the Countess?" he abruptly demanded.

"Oh, she has been in-doors for some time," replied Adolphus. "She complains of headache——"

"Ah, well," interrupted the Earl, satisfied that it was all right in that quarter: "the Countess acted prudently to go in-doors. Come, Bella, away with us at once! Take your cousin's arm——It is shocking of you to have listened to this jackanapes of a boy when you know that Adolphus——"

"Hush, my dear father!" hastily whispered the young nobleman: "poor Bella is dreadfully agitated! And you, Mr. Ashton," he added, now turning quickly to our hero, and speaking in a low hurried voice, "depart at once—your presence only irritates my father. Rest assured that I will do all I can to intercede in your behalf."

He wrung Christian's hand as he spoke—pushed the youth forward to hasten his departure—and then giving his arm to Isabella, whispered, "Cheer up, my dear cousin: we will see what can be done for the best!"

But Isabella was weeping bitterly; and on regaining the house, she hurried up to her own chamber,—where she gave unrestrained vent to her affliction. Meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles repaired to his dressing-room, to detail his grievances to Makepeace, and to have a poultice applied to his nose, which was somewhat swollen from the effects of the blow so vigorously dealt by Christian.

On the following morning Lord Osmond called upon our hero at his lodgings; and with much real sorrow informed him that though both the Countess and himself had pleaded their utmost

with the Earl on Christian's behalf, they had found him inexorable. Lord Osmond therefore counselled the youth to look out for another situation, and offered to render him any service that lay in his power. Christian bashfully expressed the hope that Miss Vincent would not suffer in her uncle's estimation; and it was a solace to him, in the midst of his affliction, to learn that his lordship had expressed no particular views with regard to his niece; but had merely hinted that he should keep a sharp eye upon her for the future.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE VISIT TO THE REGENT'S PARK.

MEANWHILE Christina had been for a few weeks fulfilling the light and pleasing duties which she had to perform towards the Princess Indora. These consisted chiefly in reading to her Highness —in practising music with her—and assisting her researches into the historical records and the institutions of the British Empire. The Princess treated her precisely as Lady Octavian Meredith had done: namely, as a friend and as an equal; so that our youthful heroine experienced not the slightest sense of a dependent position. She took all her repasts with the Princess, and rode out with her in the carriage. Now that the fine weather had returned, they walked in the garden of an evening; and the more Christina saw of the King of Inderabad's daughter, the greater was the esteem she experienced towards her.

Christina had, on her first visit to the secluded villa-residence, been astonished at the mingled sumptuousness and elegance of that abode, which appeared to realize all her dream-like notions of oriental splendour, or of those miniature palaces whereof we read in fairy tales. But far more was she amazed by the magnificent beauty of the Princess and the dark splendour of Sagoonah's charms. Indeed, everything connected with this retreat of the oriental exotics was fraught with interest and novelty for the young maiden. Not the slightest idea had she of the motive which had brought the Princess to England: nor had she the least suspicion that Mr. Redcliffe had ever crossed that threshold. On the day that she first applied for the situation, Indora had confidentially informed her that her real rank was that of a Princess; but that in order as much as possible to avert public curiosity, she concealed her high position and passed merely as an oriental lady of fortune. Christina had mentioned Zoe's name as that of one to whom reference could be made if requisite; and Indora—perceiving from the way in which Christina spoke, that she was on intimate terms with Zoe—gave her permission to mention confidentially the real rank of the lady into whose household she was about to enter. Thus there was no breach of trust on Christina's part in stating that much to Lady Octavian Meredith.

For an hour or two every day, the Princess Indora shut herself up in that exquisitely appointed boudoir which we described on the first occasion that we introduced her to the reader; and there she employed herself in examining a portion of twenty enormous volumes which were piled up in the room, and which consisted of files of the *Times* for as many years as there were volumes. Once or twice during the first two or three weeks of her residence beneath that roof, Christina had occasion to enter the boudoir to speak to the Princess; and she found her poring over the leaves of those files with a most earnest intentness. The young maiden however attached no importance to the circumstance—but simply ascribed it to that love of instruction which the Princess displayed in all matters that concerned the affairs of Great Britain.

One day, as Christina entered the sumptuously furnished drawing-room, she perceived a note lying upon the carpet; and fancying that it was some stray piece of paper of no consequence—but that it ought not to be left to mar the exquisite neatness with which the apartment was kept—she picked it up. A glance however at the paper showed that it was a letter; and without reading even a single word of it, she placed it upon the table. At that very instant the Princess Indora entered; and Christina, presenting her the note, said, "I found this lying upon the carpet."

The oriental lady's superb eyes appeared to recognise it at a glance; and for a moment there was a gentle flush sweeping over the delicate duskiness of her countenance. Christina beheld it; and mistaking its cause, said somewhat proudly, "Your ladyship" (for the title of Highness was not used beneath that roof) "cannot possibly think that I would violate the sanctity of your letter."

"No, my dear Christina," exclaimed Indora, with the enthusiasm of generous frankness: "not for a single moment could I do you such injustice! Besides, after all," she added, as if she thought it necessary to account for whatsoever change of features might have inspired our heroine with that misapprehension: "there is nothing in this note that you may not see. I received it some months back, as you will observe by the date."

Thus speaking, the Princess opened the letter; and handing it to Christina, bade her read it. Miss Ashton obeyed; and with considerable surprise read the following lines:—

"Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square,
"January 11, 1848.

"Mr. Redcliffe presents his most dutiful regards to her Highness the Princess of Inderabad, and begs to inform her it has come to his knowledge that some evil-disposed persons may probably seek to inveigle her Highness or the ayah Sagoonah into a snare, for purposes to which Mr. Redcliffe will not farther allude. He however deems it his duty thus to put her Highness upon her guard; and if instructions be issued that no communication is to be held by her Highness's dependants with strangers, every needful precaution will have been adopted.

"Her Highness the Princess of Inderabad."

The moment she caught sight of the address from which the note was dated, and of the name of Redcliffe, an expression of surprise appeared upon Christina's countenance: but this deepened into alarm as she continued the perusal of the letter. The Princess failed not to observe the effect which it produced upon her; and perceiving that the surprise was something apart from the announcement contained in the note itself, she said, "What thus strikes you, my young friend?"

"Simply," responded Christina, "that I have some little acquaintance with the gentleman who penned this billet: and my brother—who has occasionally visited me here, with your ladyship's kind permission—is far more intimate with him."

"Indeed! you know Mr. Redcliffe?" said Indora, subduing as well as she was able the thrilling trepidation which she ever felt on breathing that name.

Christina proceeded to explain how she herself had once lodged in the same house where the note was dated—and how, on subsequently meeting Mr. Redcliffe, she had been enabled to interest him in the case of the poor seamstress, Mary Wright. She went on to expatiate on Mr. Redcliffe's bounty towards that unfortunate creature,—showing how delicately yet unostentatiously his ministrations were rendered until she sank into the eternal sleep of death. Indora listened with the deepest inward interest: but she had sufficient guard over herself to prevent her countenance from betraying all she felt.

"And that was not the only good deed on Mr. Redcliffe's part that has come to my knowledge," continued Christina. "Through him the dreadful purposes of a wicked husband towards an amiable and innocent wife, were completely frustrated; and I am proud to reflect that my brother Christian played no insignificant part on the side of justice and virtue."

"Tell me this narrative," said the Princess: "the little you have already spoken on the subject interests me."

Christina accordingly entered upon the recital of those incidents which are so well known to the reader, and the full particulars of which she had received from her brother's lips. In the course of her history, it became necessary to speak of the pond by the side of the road, in the vicinage of Oaklands, where the murder had been committed nearly nineteen years back;—and to the entire narrative did the Princess listen with the utmost attention.

"No wonder that the young woman Letitia Rodney," remarked Indora, "should have been so overwhelmed with horror when accosted by Mr. Redcliffe by the side of that pond in the deep darkness of the night!"

"The tragedy which took place there so many years ago," rejoined Christina, "was a very dreadful one. My brother Christian read the account in a piece of an old newspaper when he was first in the employment of the Duke of Marchmont."

"And did he recite to you all the particulars?" asked the Princess.

"Briefly so," responded Christina. "Yes—it was a sad tale—full of a romantic and fearful interest: but it has left a dread stigma upon the names of the Duchess Eliza and of Bertram Vivian."

The Princess Indora rose from her seat and advanced towards the window, from which she gazed forth in silence for two or three minutes. At length again turning towards Christina, she said, "Our conversation has flowed into a channel which has interested me. I have a complete file of a London newspaper in the boudoir: you are far more expert than I am in everything which relates to the concerns of your own country:—will you endeavour to find for me the accounts of the particular tragedy of which you have been speaking?"

"With pleasure," answered our heroine: and away she tripped to the boudoir,—the Princess shortly afterwards following. Christina referred to the volume which contained the set of newspapers for the year 1829; and she had little difficulty in discovering the accounts of the appalling tragedy at Oaklands. They ran through several numbers; and even for weeks and months after it occurred, there were occasional paragraphs referring to it, and chronicling the various surmises that were abroad at the time in respect to what had become of the Duchess Eliza and of Bertram Vivian. All these did Christina mark with ink, so as to be more easy of reference for the Princess Indora; and having finished her task, she was about to retire,—when Sagoonah entered, bearing a letter addressed to the young maiden. The volume of the *Times* which she had been searching, lay open upon the table: the ayah's dark eyes glanced for an instant towards it, as if in wonder at the colossal subject of her Royal mistress's and her youthful companion's studies: she presented the letter with that graceful inclination of the form which showed all its willowy and bayadere-like elasticity to such advantage—and then withdrew.

Christina instantaneously recognised the handwriting of Lady Octavian Meredith; and she passed into the drawing-room to peruse the letter. Therein Zoe informed her that though her health had improved since Christina left, it was not yet sufficiently re-established to enable her to fulfil her promise of calling upon her at the Princess Indora's residence: but she begged our heroine to come and pass a few hours with her on the following day,—adding that she should be otherwise altogether alone, as Lord Octavian had promised to spend the whole of that day with his father the Marquis of Penshurst. Christina could not help thinking that there was a certain significancy in this latter notification, and that it was meant as an assurance that she might in all safety accept the invitation without the fear of encountering Meredith. The young girl caught a sigh rising up in her throat: but by a strong and hasty effort she subdued it; and though in the solitude of her own chamber, she blushed at this half-betrayal of her own weakness unto herself. To divert her thoughts into a new channel, she sped back to the boudoir,—where she found the Princess deeply engaged in the perusal of the newspaper-volume which Christina had marked for the purpose. The young maiden handed Zoe's letter to her Highness: and when the Princess had read it, she said, with her wonted amiability, "I understand, my young friend, that you seek my permission to accept her ladyship's invitation. It is cheerfully accorded; and the carriage shall be at your disposal to-morrow."

Christina thanked the Princess for her kindness; and returning to her own chamber, she penned a note to Lady Octavian Meredith, to the effect that she would be with her at noon on the following day. The approaching visit naturally brought recent incidents back to the young maiden's mind with some degree of vividness. She was almost certain that Zoe either suspected or else positively knew her husband's passion: for this alone could

explain the tacit readiness with which Zoe consented to separate from our heroine—or at least how it was that she did not offer any serious remonstrance. And now, perhaps, the reader may wonder whether Christina had acquainted her brother with the circumstances which had led to her change of situation. Yes: the young maiden had spoken frankly to Christian—and had described all that had occurred: but she did not even hint that her own feelings were not altogether so indifferent as she knew they ought to be with regard to Lord Octavian. Her virginal modesty would not permit her to avow even to the ear of an affectionate brother that which she would not admit unto herself: for though there was the suspicion—at times more distinct than at others—in her mind that Lord Octavian's love had not proved entirely displeasing to her, she endeavoured to banish that suspicion—she did all that she could to crush it—and whenever she found the handsome young nobleman's image stealing into her thoughts, she at once strove to turn them completely into some other channel.

In the evening, when seated at the dinner table with the Princess Indora, Christina observed, "The conversation with your ladyship this morning changed to a topic which so engrossed our attention, that I had not the opportunity of expressing my hope that Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter was never justified by any actual attempts of the nature to which he alluded?"

"Immediately on the receipt of it," responded the Princess, "I gave to the faithful Mark"—thus alluding to her steward and major-domo—"the instructions which Mr. Redcliffe had himself suggested. Two or three persons—male and female—had been noticed by Mark lurking about in the neighbourhood; and they endeavoured to enter into conversation with him: but he treated them with so chilling a reserve that they saw they had nothing to gain in that quarter. During the last two or three months I have heard no more of such attempts to pry into my proceedings."

"Is it possible that your Highness has enemies in this country?" asked Christina, with the most perfect ingenuousness: for her pure mind, as inexperienced as it was artless, entertained not the slightest notion as to what the snare could be into which it was sought to inveigle the Princess and Sagoonah.

"No—thank heaven, I fear not enemies!" answered the Princess. "But you, my sweet young friend, comprehend not as yet that there are persons wicked enough in this world to spread nets for the feet of others:"—and having thus spoken, the oriental lady gave the conversation an immediate turn—not however with abruptness, but in a way that seemed perfectly natural.

Precisely at noon on the following day, Christina alighted from the carriage at the Meredith's habitation in the Regent's Park; and as it was already arranged that the equipage was to return to fetch her at four, she had no fresh orders to give—and the vehicle was at once borne away again by the handsomely caparisoned pair attached to it. In a few moments the young maiden found herself clasped in the arms of Zoe.

Lady Octavian received Christina in the drawing-room: she looked pale and languid; and our heroine was distressed to perceive that her beloved friend was yet some distance from complete restoration to health. Zoe questioned her in the kindest manner as to her new position; and she expressed her delight to hear that Christina was so happy with the Princess of Inderabad. An hour thus passed while they were in conversation together; and during the whole time Lady Octavian never once mentioned the name of her husband. There was however nothing pointed in this avoidance of such mention: it might or it might not have been a mere accident arising from the circumstance that the conversation flowed in channels rendering any allusion to Lord Octavian perfectly unnecessary. Refreshments were served up: but scarcely was the luncheon-tray removed, when his lordship's well-known knock was heard at the front door. Christina recognised it in a moment: she was thrown off her guard—she started—she blushed—she was filled with confusion.

"It is Lord Octavian," said Zoe, in a quiet tone: and yet it struck Christina, as she glanced towards her friend, that a slight tremulousness was visible in her frame. "He must either have changed his mind in respect to passing the day with his father: or else the Marquis must have some other engagement which prevents him from entertaining his son."

While Zoe was thus speaking, Christina had leisure to recover somewhat from her confusion; and she felt the necessity of retaining all her self-possession. She was about to hint that she must now return to Bayswater, when she recollected that she had ordered the carriage to return not until four in the afternoon; and she therefore immediately perceived that were she now to depart abruptly, it would be admitting to Zoe that she attached a significancy to the circumstance of Lord Octavian's unexpected presence. For though she had little doubt in her own mind that Zoe had more or less penetrated the circumstance which led to her removal to another home,—yet it was one of those things concerning which the pure minds of two friends could not very readily show that they had any tacit but mutual understanding.

While all these thoughts were sweeping through Christina's mind, Lord Octavian's well-known footsteps were ascending the stairs: they approached the drawing-room door—and he entered. Fortunately he had heard from the footman who gave him admission, that Miss Ashton was with her ladyship; and therefore he was not taken by surprise on finding Christina there. Ah! but he should not have entered the drawing-room at all, while thus knowing whom he was destined to meet! He had even said so to himself while ascending the stairs: yet an irresistible impulse urged him on; and though conscience told him that he was doing wrong, inclination was stronger than conscience!

Assuming an air of mere friendly courtesy, he advanced to Christina, proffering his hand: she hesitatingly gave him hers—he retained it for a single moment—and having exchanged with her the usual compliments of courtesy, sat down close by Zoe's easy-chair.

"You did not expect my return so soon, dearest Zoe," he said, as if endeavouring to concentrate the greater part of his attention upon his wife:

"ner did I, when leaving you in the morning, think that I should see you again until the evening. But my father was called into the country on unforeseen business scarcely an hour ere I arrived; and then I received a message requesting me to postpone my visit till the day after to-morrow."

"I hope it is nothing unpleasant?" said Zoe, with that amiable placidity and soft mournfulness which had characterised her tone and manner ever since the accident that led to her illness.

"No—nothing of any great consequence," answered Octavian,—"merely a suddenly discovered defalcation in the accounts of his bailiff: but it is to no serious amount."

The young nobleman then proceeded, with well-bred facility, to glide into a conversation on general topics,—and in which Zoe bore her part, if not with cheerfulness, at least with an apparent interest: though Christina could not help thinking it was really to prevent the discourse from flagging and thereby causing embarrassment to perhaps all three. The young maiden herself spoke but little: the mere necessity of keeping continuously on her guard, so as not to betray that sense of awkwardness that she inwardly and strongly felt, was at times hurrying her to the very brink of confusion. She sat with her eyes bent down, or else with her looks averted in another direction from the spot where Lord Octavian was seated. She did not choose to meet his regards. Not that she in this respect mistrusted herself: it was impossible for that pure-minded girl to display any significancy of look under such circumstances: but she knew not how Octavian might gaze upon her, or into what increased embarrassment and awkwardness he might plunge her.

Thus half-an-hour passed: Christina glanced at the time-piece—still two more hours must elapse ere the carriage would come! Did Lord Octavian intend to remain in the drawing-room the whole time? It appeared so. All of a sudden Zoe directed Christina's attention to a portfolio of new and splendid prints which lay upon the table; and the young maiden, infinitely relieved—and half suspecting that Zoe meant purposely thus to relieve her—hastened to look over them. In doing this, she seated herself in such a way that without absolutely turning her back in rudeness towards Octavian, she nevertheless could without restraint avoid meeting his looks. By these means another hour was passed; and then Zoe requested Christina to favour her with an air upon the piano. The young maiden was compelled to advance towards the instrument: but she did so with a visible embarrassment; and Lady Octavian suddenly exclaimed, "No, my dear Christina: it is too bad that I should thus task you when you come to visit me out of friendship—and we have so short a time to be together!"

"I see," said Lord Octavian, rising from his seat, and endeavouring to smile—though the attempt was but a sickly one after all—"that I am one too many here: but I know that you ladies have your little secrets. I shall bid you farewell, Miss Ashton."

Again he presented his hand: again hers was given hesitatingly: he held it but for a moment—and then somewhat hurriedly quitted the room. Christina resumed her seat close by Zoe; and it struck her at the moment that the amiable lady was forcing herself to suppress a sigh. At that same instant, too, our heroine's gentle bosom was so full of emotion that she could have thrown herself into her friend's arms and given vent to her feelings with a gush of tears. But by a mighty effort she conquered this weakness. Zoe at once glided into conversation again; and her manner was, if possible, more kind and more sweetly affable than ever towards Christina. At length the carriage came; and when the two friends was about to part, Zoe said, "I am in hope, dearest Christina, to be enabled to return this visit in a very short time:" but she did *not* add that if this hope were disappointed, she should expect our heroine to renew her own visit to the Regent's Park.

They embraced warmly, and separated. Christina was half afraid of finding Lord Octavian down stairs in order to hand her to the carriage: but he was not there—and she took her way back towards Bayswater. While seated in the vehicle, she reviewed every incident which had occurred within the last four hours. Scarcely a doubt remained in her mind as to the fact that Zoe had penetrated her husband's secret: and now a reminiscence suddenly flitted into Christina's brain. She wondered that she had not thought of it before! For, on that day when the accident with the phaeton occurred, it had struck her for an instant that she beheld Zoe's eyes suddenly close as she turned towards her immediately after those passionate exclamations had burst from Octavian's lips. Ah! doubtless Zoe's ear had caught them!—they had revealed to her the secret of her husband's love for another!—and if Zoe had really thus known it all along, it would account for the entire tenour of the admirable lady's conduct since that moment which struck a fatal blow to her happiness.

"Good heavens!" thought Christina to herself, shuddering and shivering at the bare idea that her surmise was correct; "what a sacrifice of feeling is the generous-hearted Zoe making in every way! She knows her husband's unlawful and disastrous love—she knows that I, though heaven can tell how unwittingly, am its object—and yet she does not hate me! No: she is too magnanimous! And she will not make her husband blush in her presence by suffering him to perceive that she has penetrated his secret. Perhaps she pities him,—perhaps she feels for him, making allowances for a heart that has no power over its own volition? And now she is cherishing this secret—she locks it up in her own bosom—she studies by every action, word, and look, to excite the belief that she suspects it not! Admirable Zoe! Ah, no wonder that there is sadness in her tone—soft plaintiveness in her looks: for these it is impossible she can altogether control!"

And then, while still seated in the carriage which was bearing her homewards, Christina wept scalding tears of anguish,—wept as if she herself were a wilfully guilty destructrix of the amiable Zoe's happiness!

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CHAPTER XLVI.

THE MILLINER.

But in the meanwhile, let us see what had taken place at the villa-residence of the Princess Indora.

The carriage left that house at about three o'clock in order to reach the Regent's Park at the hour appointed to fetch Christina home; and Mark, the steward, went with it as far as Oxford Street, as he had several purchases to make on behalf of the household which he superintended. Sagoonah issued forth as if to walk in the garden; and her tall, lithe, supple form, arrayed in the white garments of an ayah, was lost amidst the avenues of embowering trees. There was a strange expression in Sagoonah's lustrous eyes: they seemed to burn with an unearthly light;—a mingled fierceness and satisfaction hovered in their luminous depths, defying all power of description. Her lips of vivid scarlet were at first compressed as if with the resoluteness of some settled purpose: but on reaching the extremity of the garden, where it was bounded by a close fence separating it from a field, the ayah paused to listen: and then her thin bright lips, parting with the hushed state of suspense, revealed her teeth of ivory whiteness and purity. The finely modelled bust, which the white garment only partially concealed—and which in its round and well-divided contours, unsupported by corset, resembled sculptured marble of a dusky hue—remained upheaved with that same suspense. Then she advanced through the shrubs; and looked over the fence. She perceived a female very handsomely dressed, and carrying a large brown paper parcel in her hands, loitering about in the field. Sagoonah, on catching that female's eye, made an imperious sign for her to advance: the woman hastened to obey it, and came close up under the fence.

"Why were you not here at the moment?" demanded the ayah angrily: and though she spoke in broken English, yet her language was perfectly comprehensible.

"I was fearful of approaching too close up to the fence," was the well-dressed female's response: and she likewise spoke the English tongue in a manner which proved her to be a foreigner.

"And yet I sent word by your spy this forenoon," rejoined Sagoonah, "that you were to be here punctually at a quarter past three. However, it is of little consequence since you *are* here. Go round boldly to the front door—I will give you admittance—you are certain to obtain an interview with her ladyship—and you must *then* manage according to your own ingenuity."

As she uttered these last words, Sagoonah's eyes flashed again with a fierce unnatural brilliancy,—as if from the present proceeding she anticipated some grand triumph for herself.

"Is there nothing to be apprehended?" inquired the female with the parcel.

"Nothing," responded Sagoonah. "As I sent you word in the morning, the men-servants were sure to be out with the carriage—and Mark had arranged to go up into London to make purchases."

Having thus spoken, Sagoonah glided away from the vicinage of the fence, and re-entered the house; while the woman with whom she had been conversing, passed round to the front door. Her summons thereat was promptly answered by Sagoonah, who admitted her into the hall, and pretended to remain conversing with her a few minutes, as if to learn what her business might be. Then the ayah proceeded to the drawing-room, where her mistress was reclining upon one of the luxuriant ottomans; and with the wonted graceful inclination of her form when addressing the Princess, or any other person whom she had to regard as a superior, she said, "May it please your ladyship, the milliner has called."

"The milliner, Sagoonah?" exclaimed Indora: "I do not expect any such person. It must be a mistake."

"It does not appear to be a mistake, lady," rejoined the ayah: "for the woman speaks with the confidence of one who knows that she is right."

"Then let her come hither," answered the Princess; "and I will ascertain what her proceeding can mean."

Sagoonah bowed again, and issued from the apartment. Descending to the hall, she bent a significant look with the lustrous flashing of her eyes upon the woman who was waiting there, and whom we may as well at once announce to our reader to be none other than Madame Angelique herself.

This infamous creature followed Sagoonah to the drawing-room; and as she entered the ayah closed the door behind her. Madame Angelique—who had now personally taken in hand a business for which none of her spies nor agents had hitherto appeared competent—had seen Indora when riding in her carriage or walking in her garden; and therefore knew that she was beautiful. But now that she beheld her close, she was perfectly amazed by the mingled grandeur and enchanting magnificence of those charms which she thus contemplated. Nor less too was she astonished by the elegance, the richness, and the sumptuousness of the apartment itself. Self-possessed as the wily woman was, and generally having all her wits about her, Madame Angelique was for a few moments bewildered and astounded by the fairy scene which she beheld and the oriental houri who was its presiding genius. Indora, with her accustomed affability, gave the woman an encouraging smile: for she perceived her astonishment, and she imagined her to be respectable. Indeed, it had not for a moment entered the mind of the Princess that the visitress could be a female of infamous description, or that she was one of those very persons against whom Mr. Redcliffe's warning-letter was directed.

"I am told that you are a milliner," said Indora: "but I think that there must be some mistake, as I have not sent for any one of that description."

"Your ladyship will, I hope, pardon my intrusion," replied Madame Angelique. "I did not tell your domestic that I was sent for: but the young woman understands English so indifferently, and I myself speak it with such little accuracy, that the error arose from these circumstances."

"Ah, then," said Indora, with a glitter of suspicion for a moment appearing in her eyes, "you have called of your own accord?"

"I have taken that liberty, my lady," replied Madame Angelique, assuming her blandest smile and her most coaxingly affable demeanour. "The truth is, I go my rounds amongst ladies of fashion, and wealth—and beauty," she added, glancing with admiring significancy at Indora's splendid countenance: "I display pieces of the newest and most exquisite materials——"

"I am obliged to you for including me amongst the number," interrupted the Princess: "but I require nothing of the sort at present—nor indeed at all."

Indora made a movement as if to indicate that the woman might withdraw: but Madame Angelique was not to be so easily disposed of.

"Pray bear with me for a few minutes, gracious lady," she said; "and I will show you so rare and choice a material that I am convinced your ladyship will be ravished with it. I work for some of the highest ladies in the land: for instance, the Marchioness of Trevelyan—the Countess of Mordaunt—the Countess of Lascelles—the Duchess of Marchmont——"

"Ah, you work for the Duchess of Marchmont?" said Indora.

"Yes, my lady," responded Madame Angelique, inwardly delighted to think that she should thus have succeeded in enlisting the interest of the Princess. "I have been with the Duchess this very day:"—it was however a monstrous falsehood which she uttered, inasmuch as Lavinia had not employed her since the discovery relative to the duplicate dresses: but if she had said she had seen the Duke that day, it would have been perfectly correct.

"Are the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont in London now?" inquired the Princess.

"They are at their mansion in Belgrave Square," rejoined Madame Angelique.

"I have heard of their splendid seat of Oaklands," resumed Indora: "and should like much to see it."

"Dear me, how extraordinary!" ejaculated Madame Angelique, with well-feigned astonishment. "I can easily become the means of gratifying your ladyship's curiosity—and shall be proud and happy to do so."

"Indeed! How?" exclaimed the Princess, with visible interest depicted on her magnificent countenance.

"His Grace the Duke of Marchmont is accustomed to treat me quite in a familiar manner," responded the wily Frenchwoman, who could scarcely conceal her mingled surprise and joy that matters should thus be taking a turn which seemed so favourable to her own atrocious designs. "You see, my lady, I have worked some years for the Duchess; and the Duke takes such pride in beholding his wife well dressed, that he seems to fancy he can never sufficiently display his gratitude towards the French *artiste* who furnishes her Grace's toilet:—and that *artiste* is your ladyship's humble servant," added Madame Angelique with a low curtsey.

"I understand," observed Indora: "the Duke is kind to you—and if you ask him a favour, would grant it?"

"Your ladyship has only anticipated what I was about to say," rejoined the infamous woman. "Ah, my lady! Oaklands is a most beautiful place. Such magnificent grounds—gardens so exquisitely laid out—superb aviaries, fountains, and statues—ponds with gold and silver fish—ornamental water, with stately swans floating on its surface—conservatories of the choicest fruits and flowers,—it is a perfect paradise! And then, too, the interior of the mansion itself—its sumptuous apartments—the delicious views it commands—and its splendid picture-gallery,—I am sure, my lady, that with your exquisite taste, and with your love of the beautiful," continued Madame Angelique, glancing around the drawing-room, "you would be delighted with a few days' residence in that charming place."

"Your description has indeed excited my curiosity," observed Indora; "and I should much like to pay a few hours' visit to Oaklands."

"A few hours, my lady!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "I am confident that if I said but a single word—and you would so far honour me as to bid me say that word on your behalf—I could obtain permission for your ladyship to make Oaklands your home for a week or a fortnight. The Duke and Duchess are not there; and you would be undisturbed mistress of the mansion."

"But it would be a most extraordinary request to make on the part of a perfect stranger," said the Princess.

"Nothing extraordinary, when that stranger is an oriental lady of rank and fortune. Besides," added Madame Angelique, "these things are frequently done in England; so that the Duke and Duchess would be delighted to place their mansion at your ladyship's disposal for a short period."

"I am exceedingly indebted to you for this assurance," answered Indora: "and I am almost inclined to accept your courteous offer. Open that parcel, and show me the contents."

Madame Angelique did as she was directed, and exhibited four or five superb pieces of dress-material,—each piece containing the requisite quantity to be made up into costume.

"What are the prices of these?" asked Indora.

Madame Angelique named the specific sums, inwardly chuckling the while at the prospect of succeeding in the object of her mission, in comparison with which she cared little for the sale of her costly materials,—which indeed, as the reader may suppose, she had only brought with her as a blind.

"I will purchase them all," said Indora: and drawing forth a purse from beneath the immense velvet cushion on which she was half reclining, she counted forth the sum in Bank of England notes.

"Your ladyship will perhaps permit me to make up these materials after the European fashion?" said Madame Angelique. "Pardon me for the compliment—but your ladyship would look as well in such apparel as in that sweetly picturesque costume which your ladyship now wears."

"No: leave these pieces here," replied Indora. "But you may make me three or four dresses of a far more simple character—such, for instance, as English ladies ordinarily wear. You may furnish me likewise with bonnets and shawls to match: for if I am really to pay this visit to Oak-

lands, I must appear there in a garb which will avert the gaze of disagreeable curiosity."

"I understand, my lady," answered Madame Angelique. "I have your exquisite form so completely in my mind's eye, that no measurement is necessary; and I am confident of being enabled to afford your ladyship the completest satisfaction. Indeed, such faultless contours as your ladyship's——"

"But look you!" interrupted Indora: "I have my own reasons for desiring all this to be contrived with some little privacy. In short, when I return to my native land, I would not have it known that I had even for a few days assumed the national garb of English ladies. Therefore come not yourself again to this house: but when the costumes are in readiness, forward them to me, packed in boxes. Send me your account by the post; and I will remit you a draft for the payment. At the same time that you will have occasion thus to communicate with me, you can let me know whether you have been enabled——"

"To obtain the ducal permission for your ladyship to make a short sojourn at Oaklands?" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Oh, I can take it upon myself to give your ladyship a most positive assurance upon the point! And at the same time that I have the honour of communicating with your ladyship, I will furnish instructions relative to the route which is to be taken to Oaklands, should your ladyship proceed thither in a private manner by post-chaise—which will be the better means of conveyance."

"I am really obliged to you," responded Indora, "for all the kind interest you are thus displaying towards the gratification of the whim which I have conceived. Probably in a week or ten days I shall hear from you?"

"Assuredly so, my lady," replied Madame Angelique.

Indora now, by a gesture, intimated that the audience was at an end; and the Frenchwoman carried herself by dint of a continuous series of curtsies towards the door. But perhaps, if she had observed as she closed that door behind herself the singular expression which swept over the superb countenance of the oriental lady, she would have had some misgiving as to the real meaning of Indora's conduct throughout this proceeding: for it was an expression of such mingled scorn, contempt, triumphant satisfaction, all so strangely blended as scarcely to be definable in words.

Madame Angelique found Sagoonah waiting in the hall to afford her egress; and the rapid significant look which the wily woman bent upon the ayah, conveyed to the latter an intimation of complete success. Then Sagoonah's naturally lustrous eyes, flashed still more brilliant fires—but assuredly not alone with a gratified greed experienced on account of the gold which Madame Angelique thrust into her hand. Indeed, the Frenchwoman herself could not comprehend the luminous strangeness of the ayah's looks; and for a moment they troubled her as if with a sort of vague and unknown terror. Yes—and even as she hurried away from the villa-residence,—and while chuckling too at the success of her scheme with regard to that oriental lady of an almost fabulous beauty, —she felt as if she were still followed by the wild influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PRISONER.

It was now the beginning of June; and three months had elapsed since the dreadful murder of Mr. Pollard at Liverpool. The Spring Assizes had passed without seeing Lettice Rodney brought to trial: but as there was to be a Summer Assize holden, it was expected she would on this occasion appear before the jury. The reason for the postponement of the trial at the first-mentioned assizes, was the serious illness of the prisoner. It was however rumoured that she was not altogether without friends,—that eminent counsel had been engaged in her behalf—and that Sir William Stanley, a wealthy Baronet residing in the neighbourhood, and who was in the commission of the peace, had exhibited much interest in her behalf. Still the general impression appeared to be that she was guilty,—the details of the circumstantial evidence telling so fearfully against her. Sir William Stanley, however, seemed to be an exception to the rule; and so far as his friends could judge from the few words he let drop on the subject, and the peculiarity of his look when it was broached in his presence, it was believed that *he* at least was not so strongly impressed by that evidence, even if he did not go so far as to imagine her completely innocent.

Lettice Rodney had indeed been seriously ill. The terrible accusation which pressed against her —the weight of the testimony upon which she was committed—had almost completely crushed her. If really guilty of the crime, she would have perhaps borne herself more courageously than she did when, being conscious of her innocence, she thus lay under an imputation of the blackest turpitude. After her committal for trial, she was for many weeks in a state bordering upon dissolution,—sometimes raving in the delirium of fever, at others sinking into a torpor so profound that it appeared as if it were the high road leading to the portals of death's mansion. She was lodged during this severe illness in the infirmary of the gaol; and every attention was shown her by the official authorities and the medical men. To a certain extent this humane treatment would have been displayed towards her without the prompting of any external influence, and notwithstanding the fearful crime with which she was charged: but those attentions had been perhaps all the more indulgent on account of the intervention of Sir William Stanley on the young woman's behalf. The Baronet nevertheless suffered it to be understood, for his own character's sake, that he had no previous acquaintance with Lettice Rodney, and that he was actuated by mere motives of humanity, —an averment which was fully supported by his reputation for the highest honour and integrity. We should observe that Sir William Stanley was a man of about sixty: all the early part of his life had been passed in India, where he had amassed a considerable fortune, and by the services rendered to the Government in a variety of ways had obtained the title of Baronet. He was a widower, but had one son—a young man of about four-and-twenty, and who was a captain in a cavalry regiment. We must further observe

that circumstances had induced Sir William Stanley to revisit India some three years previous to the date of which we are now writing, and that he had only returned to England about a twelvemonth back.

It was the first week in June—and in a chamber communicating with the female infirmary of the Liverpool gaol, Lettice Rodney sat. How changed was her appearance from that glory and bloom of beauty which had invested her ere she found herself charged with the tremendous crime of murder! But terrible are the ravages which those joint scourges—care and illness—are enabled to effect upon the human form; and the most blighting influence of the former as well as the fiercest rage of the latter had wreaked themselves upon the unfortunate Lettice Rodney. Her shape, once so voluptuous in its superb proportions, had become emaciated: her cheeks, once so plump and with the roseate bloom of health upon them, had grown sunken and deadly pale; her eyes, deep in their cavernous orbits, had lost their fire; and the ashy lips received an added ghastliness from the fine white teeth. And her look too—Oh, how profoundly sad it was! That countenance which had been wont to beam with sunny smiles, or to glow with the flush of sensuous passion, now seemed to be the tombstone of a perished heart, and on which was traced the epitaph of a happiness that was gone, never to come back!

It was about noon when she was thus seated in her chamber on the occasion that we now propose specially to direct the reader's attention thither. She was clad in the very plainest dress that she had brought with her from London at the time of her ill-fated journey: there was nothing coquettish about her now—no studied air of seductiveness in her toilet any more than there was in her looks. She seemed an altered creature,—but one of those beings whom it is necessary for the hand of Providence to drag, for its own wise purposes, through the most terrible ordeals, and whose hearts must pass through fiery furnaces in order that they may be chastened. Books were before her upon the table at which she sat; and they were books which she read *now*—but which only a few months back, when in the luxurious saloons at Madame Angelique's house of gilded infamy, she would have tossed away from her with the light laugh of scorn.

Yes—and bitterly, bitterly did Lettice Rodney repent of her misdeeds. She thought of the Duchess of Marchmont, to accomplish whose ruin she had lent herself; and the conviction was strong in her mind that her own calamity was to a certain extent a judgment upon her head for her wickedness *then*. But she knew that she had many, many other sins to answer for:—for instance, her personation of Mrs. Rayner in order to rob the lawyer of his money: and then too the very object of the journey which she had undertaken at the time—namely, to try and wean away Eveleen O'Brien from that parental home to which the reformed young woman had gone back. For all these misdeeds, either accomplished or meditated—and for the life of voluntary pollution and depravity which she had led—did Lettice Rodney believe herself most righteously punished now.

And yet she was not altogether without the hope that her innocence would yet be made apparent; and entertaining this hope, her present contrition was all the more praiseworthy: for it would indeed have been comparatively little worth if merely the result of that terrorism which belongs to the anticipation of an inevitably ignominious fate. But whence arose that hope? A few words will explain. When Lettice Rodney was beginning to recover from her dangerous illness—when she awoke from that long period of mingled delirium and torpor, to a consciousness of her dread position—she was visited by Mr. Redcliffe. This gentleman questioned her minutely as to the whole incidents of the tragedy at Pollard's house: he likewise gave her certain instructions; and bidding her put faith in Providence, he declared that all that man could do should be done to make her innocence apparent, if innocent she really were. Then, too, did he inform her that he was the individual whom she had encountered on that memorable night by the side of the pond where he had extorted from her a full confession of her misdeeds towards the Duchess of Marchmont; and he likewise gave her to understand that when he visited Madame Angelique's den of infamy, it was in reality from no sensuous inclinations, but because he had special objects to serve. Nor less did he unfold to her that it was through his interposition the penitent Eveleen O'Brien was restored to her home and had received the parental forgiveness. From that visit on the part of Mr. Redcliffe was it that Lettice entertained the hope of her innocence being yet proclaimed to the world.

And now we return to the special occasion on which we have been speaking of her as being seated in her prison-chamber, and devoting her attention to the volumes which the chaplain and the governor had furnished. Presently the door opened; and as Lettice slowly turned her mournful look thither, expecting that it was merely the matron of the infirmary, she beheld Mr. Redcliffe. The door closed behind him; and taking a seat on the opposite side of the table, he bade Lettice resume her own, from which she had risen through respect towards the kind friend whom heaven had sent her. He made inquiries concerning her health: he questioned her as to her present frame of mind; and he found that the soul was in a better condition than the body.

"Even if my innocence be made apparent, Mr. Redcliffe," said the prisoner, in a voice of profound melancholy,—"and even if I go forth from this gaol into the great world again, I shall never recover from the blow which has so cruelly smitten me. But as for my penitence—Oh, believe me to be sincere!—I beseech you to believe that I am truly contrite!"

"Six weeks have elapsed," said Mr. Redcliffe, "since I last beheld you. You had then only just awakened, as it were, from the unconsciousness of alternating fever and torpor; and your mind was under influences but little calculated to render it calm and collected. Do you remember all that you told me then?"

"Every syllable, Mr. Redcliffe!" answered Lettice emphatically.

"And every syllable was consistent with truth?" said the philanthropist inquiringly.

"As I have a soul to be saved!" rejoined Let-

tice. "I have been very wicked—but never never was I capable of such a crime as that—— no, never! My soul would have abhorred it."

"I believe you," answered Mr. Redcliffe: "for certain little incidents have come to my knowledge which tend more or less to corroborate some portions of your narrative. Describe to me once more, as accurately and minutely as you can, the appearances of the two men whom—as you allege—you saw on that fatal night in company with Mrs. Webber the housekeeper."

Lettice did so; and Mr. Redcliffe murmured to himself in a musing manner, "Yes—they are the very same!"

"Do you—do you think that there is a prospect of my innocence being proved?" asked Lettice with an almost anguished eagerness.

"I hope so," responded Redcliffe: "but I charge you not to indulge too much in a hope which might possibly be disappointed. Heaven is the disposer of all events; and it is only by heaven's sufferance that man can be permitted to work them out to a particular end. I shall tell you nothing of the plans I am adopting on your behalf: suffice it for you to know that I am not idle."

"What can I say, Mr. Redcliffe," asked Lettice, profoundly moved, "to convince you of my gratitude?"

"I am certain that you are grateful," he answered: "but it is not gratitude that I require—it is the assurance that you are truly penitent for those misdeeds that you *have* committed. And in this also I believe you. I learn from the governor sufficient to convince me that you fulfilled the injunctions which I gave you on the occasion of my former visit."

"Oh, not for the world, Mr. Redcliffe, would I have neglected them!" exclaimed Lettice. "That infamous woman Madame Angelique came down from London to see me a few days after you were last here: but I refused to receive her. Then she sent an attorney residing at Liverpool, to offer to conduct my case: but I told the man of business that I was fortunately not without friends—and that even if I were, I would accept nothing at the hands of Madame Angelique."

"These particulars I have learnt from the governor," remarked Mr. Redcliffe: "and I am pleased to find that you have thus fulfilled all my instructions. Your trial will come on shortly: able counsel has been retained for you—and as I have already hinted, I am not idle in other respects. I have entrusted your case to the most eminent solicitor in Liverpool; and this afternoon he will call upon you to ascertain whether he has correctly taken down every detail of the statement which I made him on your behalf. I purpose to remain in this neighbourhood for a few days; and I shall see you again. But ere I leave you on the present occasion, let me repeat my warning,—that you indulge not too far in whatsoever hope I may have held out—but that you fix your thoughts upon that heaven whose forgiveness you so much need!"

Lettice made a suitable answer; and then, as Mr. Redcliffe was about to leave her, she said, "May I hope, sir, that Madame Angelique has not succeeded by other means in enticing away Eveleen from the home to which you restored her?"

"No," answered Mr. Redcliffe: "Eveleen is with her parents. She is fully upon her guard against the machinations of that vile woman; and I have no fear that she will either relapse into error, or become the victim of any new snare."

Mr. Redcliffe then took his departure, accompanied by the heartfelt gratitude of the penitent Lettice Rodney.

While this interview was taking place between the philanthropist and the prisoner, the following conversation was being held in the grounds of a handsome country-seat, about four miles from Liverpool. That country-seat was the abode of Sir William Stanley; and the discourse to which we have just alluded, was progressing between this gentleman and his son. Captain Stanley had only arrived within the same hour at the paternal mansion,—where he was to spend a few weeks, he having obtained leave of absence from his regiment. We have already said he was about twenty-four years of age: we may add that he was a handsome young man—of the middle height—well made—and of genteel figure. He was steady in his conduct—endowed with high notions of honour—of generous disposition—and of considerable intellectual acquirements. He had a good parent: but he himself was a son of whom any father might be proud.

"And who is this Mr. Redcliffe whom you are expecting to-day?" inquired Captain Stanley, as he sauntered with Sir William through the spacious and well laid-out grounds attached to the mansion,—which we may as well observe bore the name of Stanley Hall.

"Do you not remember, my dear Robert, how I was indebted to a gallant Englishman for my life when traversing the Indian jungle——"

"Can I, my dear father, ever forget an occurrence which, when I read it, caused me for the moment as much cruel terror as if I had indeed lost you—but which the next instant was succeeded by as thrilling a joy at the certainty of your escape? You however omitted in your letter to specify the name of the valorous Englishman who rescued you from those bloodthirsty Thugs; and after your return to England you never happened to mention it."

"That gentleman, then," rejoined Sir William, "is the Mr. Redcliffe who will be with us presently."

"And most heartily shall I grasp the hand of my father's deliverer!" exclaimed the Captain. "Sincerely do I hope, too, that he will remain with us some while: for *his* is a friendship which I shall be proud to cultivate."

"You will have the opportunity," replied Sir William Stanley: "for according to the letter which I received from Mr. Redcliffe this morning, he purposes to remain with us a few days; and I know that he will be here again shortly, before your leave of absence expires,—inasmuch as he takes considerable interest in a case which has caused great excitement in our neighbourhood, and which will be brought forward at the approaching assizes——I mean that of the accused young woman, Lettice Rodney."

"Ah! that reminds me, my dear father," exclaimed the Captain, "that when you wrote to me some time ago upon the subject, you hinted that you were not quite so convinced as other persons seemed to be, of the prisoner's guilt."

"Nor am I, Robert," returned the Baronet; "and I will explain to you wherefore. The crime —by whomsoever perpetrated—took place, as you recollect, about three months back; and it was only a few days after the occurrence, that as I was walking in Liverpool I encountered Mr. Redcliffe. I instantaneously recognised the brave man to whom I owed my life: and we got into conversation. He then explained to me what had brought him to Liverpool. He had read in the newspapers the account of the murder, and the remarkable story which the accused Lettice Rodney told in her defence before the borough-magistrates. He had known something of her previously; and though he was acquainted with nothing to her credit—but the very reverse—he nevertheless did not think, from his knowledge of human nature, that she was a young woman of so thoroughly black a heart as to prompt her to the commission of such a frightful deed. Besides—without entering into detailed explanations—he informed me that he had very recently encountered her under circumstances when she was so completely overawed by the idea of being upon a spot which was the scene of a fearful murder perpetrated some years back, that he felt persuaded she had *not* the courage, even if she were sufficiently wicked, to accomplish such a crime. Her tale too—that tale which she related in her defence—had struck him as being too extraordinary to be a mere concoction; and he spoke emphatically of the danger of trusting to circumstantial evidence, as well as of the deplorable errors into which mankind has at different times fallen when rushing precipitately to a belief of a fellow-creature's guilt. Such was the tenour of Mr. Redcliffe's discourse when I encountered him nearly three months back in Liverpool; and he further informed me that he had been to the gaol to see Lettice Rodney—but that she was raving in the delirium of fever and unconscious of everything that was passing around. I invited him to the Hall: he came and passed a few days with me,—during which he instituted secret but minute inquiries into the character of the murdered lawyer's housekeeper, Mrs. Webber."

"And what was the result?" inquired Captain Stanley.

"Nothing of importance," responded the Baronet: "indeed, she appeared to be almost a complete stranger in Liverpool, and had only been a very short time in Mr. Pollard's service before he met his death in so terrible a manner. Mr. Redcliffe besought my good offices as a magistrate on behalf of Lettice Rodney; and ere he took his departure for London, he begged me to write to him so soon as the young woman should be in a condition to receive a visit from him. Six weeks elapsed before I was enabled to make such a communication: but in the meantime I received two or three letters from Mr. Redcliffe, informing me that a few little incidents which had come to his knowledge, seemed to afford something like a corroboration of certain parts of the tale which Lettice Rodney had told in her defence. At the expiration of those six weeks, Mr. Redcliffe returned, in consequence of a communication which he received from me; and he then had an interview with Lettice Rodney in the gaol. The result was to establish the conviction in his mind that she is really innocent. But he prudently abstained from giving her too much hope,—lest after all it should be doomed to disappointment. On that occasion he remained with me a few days; and now he is returning into our neighbourhood to assure himself that the lawyer to whom he has entrusted the case thoroughly understands it."

"All this is most extraordinary!" exclaimed Captain Stanley: "the whole tale is a romance!"

"From the positive manner in which Mr. Redcliffe has written and spoken to me," rejoined Sir William, "I am fully inclined to adopt his opinion. Besides, as a visiting magistrate I have seen this Lettice Rodney—I have conversed with her—I have questioned her upon various features of her tale—and I have found her consistent in all its parts. That she is penitent, too, I am well assured; and most sincerely do I hope that Mr. Redcliffe will succeed in his humane purpose."

"And I entertain a similar hope," cried Captain Stanley, with warmth. "If I can render Mr. Redcliffe the slightest assistance in prosecuting his inquiries or researches, I shall be only too happy."

"He is a strange man, Robert," observed the Baronet; "and chooses to do things in his own way. I heard it mentioned in Calcutta that he had been for many years resident—some said a prisoner—in the capital of Inderabad. It was moreover stated that he was possessed of considerable wealth. That he is the bravest of the brave, I had the best proof when he delivered me from the murderous villains in the jungle: that he is magnanimous and noble-hearted, his conduct in respect to Lettice Rodney fully certifies. It must not however be thought for a single moment that his acquaintance with this young woman originated in anything immoral. Far from it."

"I long to form the friendship of this admirable man," exclaimed the warm-hearted Captain Stanley.

At this moment a post-chaise was seen approaching through the grounds; and as it drew near, the Baronet recognised Mr. Redcliffe as its occupant. He alighted to join the two gentlemen: and the chaise went on to the Hall to deposit his portmanteau. The Baronet grasped his guest warmly by the hand—and then introduced him to his son. Mr. Redcliffe stated that he had just come from seeing Lettice Rodney in the gaol: and he expressed his conviction of her full and complete innocence of the murder, whatever her other misdeeds might have been.

The Baronet, the Captain, and Mr. Redcliffe extended their ramble to where the grounds joined the road leading to Liverpool; and as they were about to turn back again, a strange-looking woman rose up from the other side of the fence,—she having been previously seated there. She was tall and thin; and if her complexion had been swarthy, she might have been taken for one of the gipsy race: but instead of being dark, it had evidently in her more youthful period been fair—and it was now partly sallow and partly sunburnt. Her countenance was exceedingly emaciated and careworn: and a certain wild wandering expression in the eyes showed but too plainly that the unfortunate creature's intellects were unsettled. Her hair—once dark—was streaked with gray: and yet she did not appear to be old:—indeed, if her age were two or three years past forty, it was the very out-

side. As for her apparel,—it was this that at the first glance gave her a gipsy aspect. It consisted of an old cotton gown, with a dingy cloak over it; and instead of a bonnet or cap, she wore a cotton handkerchief tied round her head. Blue woollen stockings and coarse shoes completed her garb. Her appearance was however cleanly; and notwithstanding the poverty of her attire, there was a certain neatness in it which impressed the beholder with the idea that she had seen better days.

"Ah! poor Crazy Jane," said the Baronet, in a low tone and with a compassionating look, as he beheld the woman stand up from the opposite side of the fence.

"A penny for poor crazy Jane?" she said, thrusting her skinny arm between the palings.

"You know, Jane," said Sir William Stanley, with a benevolent and pitying smile, "that I never give you a penny:"—at the same time he drew forth his purse.

"No, true!" ejaculated the woman. "I remember now! Sir William Stanley is always charitable—and that is the reason I so seldom come near the Hall. I don't like to intrude on good nature. Ah, dear me! I was not always a poor wandering outcast:"—and then drawing back her hand from betwixt the palings, she pressed it to her brow.

"Poor creature!" said the Baronet. "Here are five shillings for you."

She did not however seem to hear him; but with her hand still pressed to her forehead, she muttered incoherently to herself:—then at length speaking in a louder tone, she said, "Ah! I have got something more upon my mind——I wish I could explain it—but I cannot. It is not the same thing that has haunted me so long—no, it is something new: but alas! I cannot—I cannot!" and the poor creature shook her head despondingly, as if she deeply felt her inability to give lucid expression to some idea that was uppermost in her mind.

"Here are the five shillings, Jane," said the Baronet: and he thrust them through the fence.

"Heaven's blessing upon you!" murmured the afflicted woman—and tears trickled down her wasted countenance: then taking the money, she passed abruptly away and was soon out of sight.

"She is as mad as ever, poor creature!" said the Captain. "I remember her from my boyhood."

"Yes—and I remember her for many, many years," added the Baronet. "Sadly is she changed, too, since first I knew her! She was then young and good-looking——"

"And who is this unfortunate woman?" asked Mr. Redcliffe.

"No one appears rightly able to give any explanation on the subject," returned Sir William Stanley. "She wanders about the country in all directions—and has been seen more than a hundred miles from here. Sometimes she disappears altogether for several months, and then suddenly turns up again. There is a half-ruined hut about four miles hence, which she inhabits when in the neighbourhood; and as you may suppose, she lives entirely upon charity. I have often endeavoured to lead her into conversation, and ascertain if possible what she originally was, and what calamity turned her brain: but I have never succeeded in eliciting more than that she had seen better days, and that she had stood in the presence of ladies of the highest rank,—but whether as a companion or a menial, does not very plainly appear—though I should rather suspect in the latter capacity."

The conversation presently turned into some other channel; and the three gentlemen retraced their way to the mansion.

CHAPTER XLVII.

CRAZY JANE.

It was in the forenoon—a couple of days after the arrival of Mr. Redcliffe at Stanley Hall, and while this gentleman himself had gone into Liverpool to see the solicitor employed on behalf of Lettice Rodney—that Captain Stanley was riding out on horseback, followed by one of his father's grooms. Diverging from the road, he took a smart gallop through the fields; and had arrived in the neighbourhood of a copse, which he was about to skirt, when Crazy Jane suddenly sprang up before him as if she were rising out of the earth. The Captain drew in his steed, and spoke to her with compassionating kindness.

"You are Sir William Stanley's son," she said, gazing intently upon him; "and you are a good young man—you have all your father's benevolence. No—no, do not put your hand into your pocket—I want not money now. Your father gave me enough to keep me for——I know not how long. Ah, I had something to say the moment I caught sight of you—I determined to say it—and now it is all slipping out of my head!"

At first her utterance was rapid, accentuated, and jerking: but these last words were spoken with a profound mournfulness; and pressing her hand to her forehead, she evidently strove to steady her ideas.

"What is it, Jane?" asked the young gentleman, in a kind tone. "Think—reflect—take your time: I am in no hurry if you really wish to speak to me."

"I do, I do!" ejaculated the mad woman. "It is something I have got *here*:"—and she touched her forehead. "No—it is *here!*" she added after a pause, and she laid her hand upon her heart. "It is something that oppresses me—something that lies as heavy as lead on my bosom, and prevents me from sleeping at night. I wish I could tell it—I thought I could just now—I said it all over to myself, just as I used to say my prayers when I was a child: but it has all gone out of my head!"

"What can it be?" asked Captain Stanley, much interested in the woman's words and manner: for he felt convinced that it was not a mere meaningless phase of her madness, but that it was this very madness itself which prevented her from giving lucid expression to something that she had really to reveal.

"What is it, you ask?" she said, with a sudden brightening up of her hitherto vacant desponding look. "Ah! now there is a gleam shooting into my mind——yes, yes, it is about that dreadful murder——"

"The murder?" ejaculated Stanley, all the in-

terest he had previously felt being immensely enhanced in a moment.

"Ah, it is all gone out of my memory again!" she said, shaking her head dolefully: "you made me start—you drove it away! It is of no use:"—and with these words she plunged abruptly into the copse, thus disappearing from the view of the amazed Captain and his equally astonished groom.

"There is something extraordinary in this," said Stanley to the domestic: "that woman evidently knows something—but the impression of it is upon her mind like that of an unusual object upon the mind of a child—too dim and uncertain to be properly explained. We will return at once to the Hall and tell my father what has taken place. Mr. Redcliffe, too, said he should be back by luncheon-time; and this is intelligence which he will be deeply interested to receive."

Captain Stanley accordingly took the nearest route to the Hall, which he reached just as Mr. Redcliffe was alighting from the Baronet's carriage, which had taken him into Liverpool. Sir William Stanley, his son, and their guest were speedily closeted together; and the interview between the young gentleman and Crazy Jane was the subject of deliberation.

"This is indeed most important," observed Mr. Redcliffe: "for it is evidently the same subject to which the woman alluded when we met her at the fence, and when she said that she had *something new* upon her mind."

"Let us go and see her," exclaimed the Baronet, "without delay. But no!—Redcliffe, you shall go alone—I have more faith in your power to lead her into lucid conversation than in my own. I have already so often failed. Besides, it is frequently to a stranger that these poor demented creatures will prove more rational than to those whom they have known for a long time, and who have always been accustomed to talk to them in a particular way."

"Yes," said Mr. Redcliffe, "I will lose no time in seeing her. I think you stated that her hut is about four miles distant? If you indicate the particular direction, I will set out and walk thither."

"Take the carriage—or go on horseback," exclaimed the Baronet.

"No," rejoined Mr. Redcliffe: "I will walk—because in that case I may stand a better chance of falling in with her if she be rambling about. And I will go alone too, as she may be the less embarrassed and bewildered in conversing with one than in talking in the presence of two or more."

Sir William Stanley gave Mr. Redcliffe sufficient explanations to guide him towards Crazy Jane's hut; and that gentleman accordingly set out. He had proceeded for a distance of about three miles across the fields, when on emerging into a lane bordered by high thick hedges, he perceived Crazy Jane sitting on the green bank under one of these hedges, rocking herself to and fro and speaking aloud. An idea suddenly entered Mr. Redcliffe's mind. He remembered that Captain Stanley had stated how Crazy Jane had spoken of having "said it all to herself," and how by an incautious ejaculation he had driven the poor woman's thoughts out of her head; and it therefore occurred to Mr. Redcliffe that when she was alone she was better able to keep her ideas collected. She had not as yet seen him as he emerged into the lane: he got at the back of the hedge—and stealthily creeping along, halted close behind the spot where Crazy Jane was still seated. She was continuing to muse in an audible tone, but in strangely disjointed and broken sentences,—the tenour of which was however as follows:—

"It must be many and many a year since *then*——but I cannot recollect how many! I was very different at that time——Ah, so different! People did not call me Crazy Jane. No, it was 'Jane my good girl, do this or do that.'—Ah, that was the way my poor dear mistress used to speak! Oh, how I loved her! Alas, alas, that it should have all ended as it did——shocking! shocking! I know not why I should always and always be thinking of it. And yet I can't help it. Till that *other thing* came into my mind, I never could think of anything else. How piteously she wept!—it really seems as if I saw her now standing before me. Yes, when the mist is deepest around me, I see that *one* image as plain as ever. She was not guilty——no, no, she was not! I am sure she was not! She was too good—too kind for *that*. Oh, what became of you, my dear, dear mistress?"

Crazy Jane ceased: but her sobs were audible to Mr. Redcliffe as he listened behind the hedge.

"Who was more beautiful," at length continued the mad woman in her audible musings, "than the Duchess of Marchmont? They should have married her to Bertram Vivian—and not to his uncle. Alas, alas! to have thrown that divine creature away upon that old man——it was shocking! shocking! Often and often have I thought of going to Oaklands to see the old place; and I have dragged myself for miles and miles——I wonder how many——along the roads and through the fields, until I had not the courage to go further—and then I have come back to my hut. No, no—I could not look again upon that house where I last saw the good Duchess Eliza. I could not tread those gravel-walks where I once saw her move in all the glory of her beauty! Oh, it was a dreadful day! But those tears which she shed *then* seem to fall upon my heart even *now* like scalding drops. My poor dear mistress, I could have laid down my life for you!"

Here there was another pause in the poor mad woman's musings; and again did her convulsive sobs reach the ears of Clement Redcliffe.

"What darkness and confusion have been in my brain ever since!" she once more mused audibly. "And yet there are times that I see it all before me, so plain—so plain—that I think it is taking place all over and over anew! But this *other thing* that is now in my mind——Let me reflect! When did it happen? Oh, poor creature that I am—I cannot remember anything about dates; and yet I am sure it was not near so far back as those dreadful scenes at Oaklands——no, not near so far back! I was a young woman; and they used to say I was pretty at the time the dear Duchess and Bertram Vivian——But what *could* have become of them both?" she ejaculated, thus suddenly interrupting herself: "what *could* have become of them? I wander again!—there is that other thing I wish to get back to my

mind. Let me see? If I steady my head on both my hands, I can always reflect with more clearness: I will shut my eyes, so as to see nothing to take off my attention. There—like that!"

Now the woman ceased speaking; and Redcliffe anxiously waited to hear what next might issue from her lips. But five minutes passed—and she said nothing: ten minutes—and still she continued silent. He held his breath suspended—he was motionless behind the hedge; he was so completely on his guard as not so much as to rustle a leaf for fear of interrupting her in the current of her thoughts.

"There now!" she abruptly exclaimed: "I have got the whole of it as completely in my head as if this was the night when it happened, and as if I had not thought of anything since. Ah! if any one to whom I chose to reveal it should pass by at this moment!"

Redcliffe glided noiselessly along the back of the hedge—reached the gate by which he had entered the field—and passing through it, once more emerged into the lane. Crazy Jane immediately recognised him as the gentleman whom she had seen two or three days back in company with Sir William and Captain Stanley; and by a certain association of ideas, she conceived that any friend of theirs must be a fit and proper person to receive the communications which she had to make. For the woman's intellects were not so completely disordered as to prevent her from having at times a certain amount of the reasoning faculty left: and moreover, as is the case with nearly all persons whose minds are unsettled, there were particular circumstances which would lead her ideas into a connected flow and in continuous channels. This was the case now; and for nearly half-an-hour did Redcliffe remain in discourse with Crazy Jane. He was careful how he dealt with her: he humoured her—he did not interrupt her quickly nor suddenly—he exhibited all possible patience, suffering the woman to tell her tale in her own way;—and thus from her jerking, disjointed sentences, he managed to elicit a narrative which in itself was complete as well as consistent in all its parts. What this was, we need not at present explain to the reader: suffice it to say that having obtained from the woman all he could elicit, he gave her some money and returned to Stanley Hall.

After a long conference with Sir William and Captain Stanley, it was decided that an attempt should be made to induce Crazy Jane to take up her abode at the Hall,—where it was proposed to place her under the care of the housekeeper, who was a kind-hearted and intelligent woman. We need not unnecessarily extend the details of our narrative by describing how this aim was accomplished: it is sufficient for our purpose to state that it was successfully carried out; and when the poor woman found herself apparelled in decent attire, seated in a comfortable room, supplied with good wholesome food, and treated with the most compassionating kindness, she so fully comprehended the change in her condition that she was melted to tears.

Mr. Redcliffe hastened up to London, to ascertain the progress of those measures which he had some months previously set a-foot on Lettice Rodney's behalf, and to which he had distantly alluded in his conversation with her: but on this head it is likewise unnecessary for us to enter into particulars at the present moment, inasmuch as the whole will shortly transpire.

At the expiration of another week the trial of Lettice Rodney commenced at Liverpool. The court, opening with the usual solemnities, was crowded to excess: for all the excitement which the murder had created at the time, was now revived. It had been rumoured too—as we have already said—that Lettice Rodney was not altogether without friends; and that there were certain quarters in which a belief of her innocence existed. Able counsel were engaged to prosecute—able counsel likewise appeared for the defence; and the countenances of the jury showed that they were fully aware of the deep and awful responsibility which attached itself to the duty they had to perform.

The entrance of Lettice Rodney into the court produced a strong impression upon all present. She was dressed in her plainest apparel: the bloom of her beauty was gone—but of that loveliness a sufficiency remained to show what it must have been before anguish and illness had worked such ravages upon her. Her demeanour was in one sense timid and retiring;—yet blended therewith was the look which conscious innocence can alone assume, but which superficial or worldly-minded observers nevertheless too often fancy to be the evidence of a guilt that seeks to shield itself under a bold effrontery.

The case for the prosecution commenced; and the counsel on that side detailed in his opening speech all those particulars with which the reader is already acquainted. He stated how Lettice Rodney, assuming the name of Louisa Rayner, and personating that lady, had introduced herself to Mr. Pollard for the purpose of receiving the sum of three thousand pounds which that gentleman was prepared to pay to his ward. The counsel dwelt strongly upon the circumstance of the prisoner having self-appropriated the writing-desk containing the papers which were requisite accessories to the carrying-out of the fraud; and he more than inferred that a young woman who would go to such lengths for so vilely dishonest a purpose,—could not, to say the least of it, be surprised if she found herself in her present position, accused of a crime which somebody must have perpetrated, and of which all the evidence pointed to herself as the authoress. He then detailed the particulars of the murder, according to the deposition which Mrs. Webber had made before the police-magistrate, and which she had subsequently repeated before the coroner. The learned counsel added that Mrs. Webber herself would be almost immediately placed in the witness-box, to reiterate her testimony; and then he proceeded to observe that rumours had been floating abroad within the last few days to the effect that the case for the defence of the prisoner would be far stronger than the public had hitherto expected—but he said, that for his own part he was at a loss to know what this defence could be, unless it were to revive the story which the prisoner had told before the magistrate—a story which must indeed strike every rational person as a most ingenious concoction. But if this story were brought forward, it would be nothing more nor less than

an endeavour to turn the tables against the principal witness for the prosecution; and unless there was something more substantial than the uncorroborated assertion of the prisoner in respect to Mrs. Webber and the two ill-looking men whom the prisoner's imagination had conjured up to serve her own purpose and exculpate herself,—he (the learned counsel) hoped for the honour of the English bar that no member thereof would found a defence upon unsupported recrimination and unjustifiable calumny. But if, on the other hand, the defence—as he (the prosecuting counsel) hoped and expected—was to be conducted fairly, honestly, and frankly,—he repeated his former assertion that he could not for the life of him surmise of what nature it could be. He was indeed utterly at a loss to conjecture how any evidence could be brought forward in antagonism with the testimony to be adduced for the prosecution: but he had all possible faith in the wisdom of the jury in arriving at a correct verdict in the end.

The learned counsel sat down; and the crowded auditory felt that the mass of evidence, circumstantial and direct, did indeed press with such fearful weight against the accused, that not even by the wildest conjecture could it be surmised how such a case was to be met. For every one of course felt that if the story which Lettice Rodney had told before the borough-magistrate was now to be repeated, it would require some very powerful evidence to outweigh that on the other side. Nor less was it comprehended that if this story should be proved true, it would have the effect of turning the whole weight of the dreadful accusation against Mrs. Webber, who was now summoned as the principal witness to prove Lettice Rodney's guilt.

Mrs. Webber entered the witness-box amidst a profound silence which prevailed in the court. It has already been observed that there was something sinister, if not actually repulsive, in this woman's looks; and now that she endeavoured to assume the air of one who had nothing upon her own conscience, but was intent only on serving the cause of truth and justice, there was in reality that hardihood about herself which many persons among the auditory had previously supposed to characterise Lettice Rodney. And Lettice Rodney was seen to shudder as that woman, whom for upwards of six months she had not seen, entered the witness-box: but on the other hand, Mrs. Webber flung a look of loathing and abhorrence upon Lettice—a look in which all her powers of hypocrisy and dissimulation were concentrated. The result of these conflicting demonstrations on the part of prisoner and witness was to cause the utmost suspense and uncertainty still to prevail on the part of the audience.

Mrs. Webber, in response to the leading questions put by the counsel for the prosecution, repeated the testimony she had already given before the committing magistrate and at the coroner's inquest. The barrister farther questioned her as to her own respectability,—on which point she stated that she had for many years been in the service of good families, but that for some time previous to the murder she had resided with her daughter in London, and with her son-in-law, who was a gold-beater in good circumstances; that she possessed some little means of her own—but that not being altogether comfortable and happy beneath her son-in-law's roof, she had resolved to go out into service again, as a housekeeper: that her son-in-law, Mr. Smedley, having come down to Liverpool on business, had accidentally heard that there was such a place vacant at Mr. Pollard's; that she had accordingly applied for it, and on producing testimonials, had received it.

Now commenced the cross-examination of Mrs. Webber; and this we must give somewhat in detail.

"Will you state who were the ladies of rank with whom you formerly lived," inquired Lettice Rodney's counsel, "and who gave you the testimonials which you exhibited to Mr. Pollard?"

Mrs. Webber, being prepared for this question, had her answer ready; and she accordingly named two or three ladies of whose deaths she had made herself aware. On this response being returned, Captain Stanley, who was present in the court, quitted it for a few minutes—but not in a way to attract any particular attention.

"Where are those testimonials?" asked the barrister: "and will you have any objection to produce them in court?"

"Not supposing that they would be required," answered the woman, "I left them behind me in London."

"And when did you come from London to attend this trial?" asked the barrister.

"The day before yesterday," was Mrs. Webber's response.

"Did you come alone? Answer me that question."

"There was a person in the same carriage with me, certainly."

"And, on your oath, are you ignorant who that person was?"

"No—I knew him to be a detective officer."

"You had, then, seen him before?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Webber—and for a moment she looked confused: but quickly recovering her self-possession, she prepared to answer the next query.

"Be so kind as to tell the jury under what circumstances you had seen that detective before."

"A few days back," answered Mrs. Webber, "I was going on a little journey——"

"Stop a moment!" exclaimed the cross-examining counsel. "Immediately after the inquest at Liverpool, you returned to London, I believe—where you again took up your abode with your son-in-law John Smedley?"

"Yes: but I had promised the authorities here to come forward when wanted, and give the requisite evidence——"

"Exactly so. You promised—but did you mean to perform? However," exclaimed the barrister, without awaiting an answer, "continue your statement to the jury in respect to the little journey you thought of undertaking a few days back. I believe that for this *little* journey your boxes were all packed, and a hackney-coach was at the door, when something happened? What was that something?"

"A person accosted me as I was stepping into the hackney-coach, and announced himself as a detective officer. He charged me with an intention to go abroad: but I denied it, as it was altogether untrue. Then he told me that if I

went anywhere—no matter how short or how long the distance—he should follow me; and that if I attempted to leave England, he should take me into custody."

"To be sure!" said the barrister, with a glance at the jury: "he would have taken you into custody as a witness flying from her recognizances. And what else did he tell you?—what warning did he give you?"

"That there was a watch set upon my movements, and that it would be totally useless for me to think of getting out of the country. But I told him all along that I had no such intention—nor had I: and I think it is very unfair——"

"Never mind what you think," interrupted the cross-examining counsel: "it is for the jury to think in the present case. The detective officer who accompanied you in the train, was the same who intercepted your departure from London and gave you the warnings of which you have spoken?"

"The same," answered Mrs. Webber: and her look was as much as to imply that it was all very easy for the barrister thus to cross-examine her, but that he could not shake her main testimony against the prisoner.

"How long were you in Mr. Pollard's service previous to the commission of the murder?"

"Three weeks," was the answer.

"And having been absent from your brother-in-law's house barely a month, you returned thither notwithstanding the discomfort and unhappiness which had induced you to quit it?"

"Because my daughter naturally supposed I must be very much flurried and excited after the dreadful occurrence in Liverpool; and she wrote to me to come home at once, giving me the assurance that my son-in-law would change his demeanour towards me."

And during these six months that you have been again living in London, what sort of visitors have you occasionally received?"

"What sort of visitors?" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, as if with a surprised and indignant air: but it was merely to shuffle with the question, which indeed had considerably alarmed her.

"Well, I need not press this point at present," said the cross-examining counsel; "and you may stand down."

A witness from London was now examined by the counsel for the prosecution, to prove that Lettice Rodney had been a gay lady: but the name of Madame Angelique's establishment did not transpire. Then followed the testimony of three or four of the first persons who had rushed into Mr. Pollard's house when Mrs. Webber had opened the front-door and had alarmed the neighbourhood with her cries. It was proved that the prisoner was dressed as if to go out—but that she was in a state of unconsciousness when these witnesses appeared upon the scene. In cross-examination they admitted that when Lettice came back to her senses, she seemed horrified or frenzied at being accused of murder, and that she at once hurled the charge at Mrs. Webber and spoke of two villains who were with her. The police-constables who had taken her into custody, were next examined for the prosecution; and they deposed to the finding of Mr. Pollard's purse, containing fifty pounds, upon Lettice Rodney's person. Mrs. Rayner's documents were likewise produced; and evidence was given to show that in addition to the writing-desk which had contained these papers, several articles of Mrs. Rayner's wearing apparel were discovered in Lettice Rodney's box: for the newspaper-accounts of the murder had given publicity to the fact that Mrs. Rayner was the previously unidentified victim of the railway accident, and thus her friends had come forward on learning her sad fate.

The case for the prosecution was closed; and Lettice Rodney's counsel was expected to rise to make a speech in her defence. He did rise—and profound was the suspense which prevailed in the court. The silence was breathless: but when it was broken by the counsel for the defence, there was a sensation of disappointment on his at once declaring that instead of making a speech he should proceed without delay to summon witnesses.

The first witness whom he thus called, was a middle-aged man, plainly attired, of sharp features and with a shrewd look. Mrs. Webber, who had been ordered to remain in the court, winced somewhat when she perceived this individual, whom she evidently recognised. Having been sworn, and having given his name, he stated that he was a detective attached to the metropolitan police. He then deposed to the following effect:—

"A very short time after the murder of Mr. Pollard in this town, I received particular instructions from a gentleman in London. Those instructions were to the effect that I should make all possible inquiries into the character of Mrs. Webber, and that I should watch all her movements. I at once came down to Liverpool, and learnt that immediately after the inquest she had returned to her friends in London. I had no difficulty in finding out who these friends were,—her daughter and son-in-law, bearing the name of Smedley. The Smedleys occupy a house of a somewhat respectable appearance, but situated in a low neighbourhood. They used to let lodgings, but have recently given up that avocation. Smedley himself carries on the business of a gold-beater. He seems however to have little work to do; for he is constantly sauntering about—sometimes in idleness, and at other times in distributing religious tracts. I hired a room in a house nearly fronting the Smedleys; and, aided by another detective, I watched them day and night. One evening, about a week after Mrs. Webber's return, a fellow of desperate character, well known to the police, and bearing the name of Barney the Burker, stealthily entered an alley communicating with the back part of the Smedleys' premises: but I cannot take it upon myself to say that he actually entered those premises. If I had followed to ascertain, I should have excited the suspicion that I was watching the house—and this was to be most carefully avoided, at least at the outset. A few nights afterwards, a lad of about nineteen, whose name is Bill Scott, and who is believed to be an agent of the Burker, paid a similarly stealthy visit to the alley of which I have spoken: but for the same reason as in the other case, I could not ascertain whether he entered the Smedleys' premises. A month passed, and they came not near the house again: but one night I followed Mrs. Webber at a distance, and I tracked her to the Burker's lodging in one of the lowest neighbourhoods of London.

Some weeks later I again saw the Burker pay a visit to the narrow alley; and an hour elapsed before he came out again. Subsequently Bill Scott repeated the visit three or four times; and I have not the slightest doubt that these visits had reference to Mrs. Webber. I learnt in the neighbourhood that she had lived for some years with her son-in-law and daughter; but so far from her having ever been on bad terms with them, or being rendered uncomfortable by Mr. Smedley, the contrary was supposed to be the case. A few days ago Barney the Burker paid another visit to the alley; and on this occasion he remained at least two hours. Early on the following morning a hackney-coach was fetched by Smedley—a number of boxes were brought out—and Mrs. Webber was just on the point of stepping into the vehicle, when I thought it at length time to interfere, in pursuance of a certain portion of my instructions from the gentleman employing me. I accordingly hastened to the spot, and asked Mrs. Webber where she was going. She looked confused and frightened; but almost immediately recovered herself, saying that she was only bent upon a little excursion for change of air. I glanced at the boxes, and saw that they were labelled, '*Mrs. Smith, passenger, Dover.*' I asked her why she took a false name? She gave some evasive reply; but again recovering her effrontery, demanded who I was. I told her that I was a detective officer, and gave her to understand that my mission was merely to prevent her from running away from her recognizances, and to enforce her attendance at this trial. She did not choose to pursue her journey after receiving this intelligence; because I further stated that if on arriving at Dover by the railway, she attempted to embark on board a vessel, I should at once take her into custody. She remained at home for the few days which intervened until it was necessary for her to set off to come to Liverpool. Myself and the other detective continued to watch the house unceasingly after the affair of that intended journey; and in order that Mrs. Webber might not give me the slip between London and Liverpool, I took my place in the same carriage with herself."

The detective, whose evidence had produced a considerable sensation in court, was now cross-examined by the counsel for the prosecution; and the following string of answers will show the nature of the questions put:—

"I have been watching Mrs. Webber for six months. I decline to say what is the name of the gentleman who employed me: but this I will of my own accord declare—that my conviction is he never was the protector of the prisoner, nor was improperly familiar with her, but merely took up her case from motives of humanity. It is true that he has paid all my expenses and has rewarded me liberally. It is no unusual thing for the detectives to be employed by private individuals; nor is it unusual for them to be thus occupied so long a time. I know nothing, and did not mean to infer anything, against the character of the Smedleys. It is perfectly true that they pass in their own neighbourhood as respectable people, and that Smedley is an active member of a religious congregation. It is likewise true that Mrs. Webber is considered in the same neighbourhood a respectable woman."

Here ended the cross-examination on the part of the prosecuting counsel: and the barrister for Lettice Rodney's defence said to the detective, "You must now go out of court and out of hearing: but I shall require your attendance again presently."

The officer accordingly issued from the tribunal; and the counsel for the defence then addressed the judge in the following manner:—

"My lord, I am about to make an application of a somewhat extraordinary character. There is a witness whose evidence is of vital importance to the present case; but it is impossible she can give that testimony personally and orally before this solemn tribunal. Indeed, I will at once admit that her intellects are in so weak a state that she would become bewildered and would inevitably break down. But she has been examined by two justices-of-the-peace: namely, Sir William Stanley and Mr. Simon Ellis—both gentlemen of the highest respectability; and this examination took place in the presence of two physicians well known for their skill and experience with respect to the insane and in all psychological matters. The woman's deposition has been committed to paper: it is accompanied by attesting affidavits on the part of the two justices who received her evidence; and there are likewise affidavits from the medical gentlemen, to the effect that the woman's testimony is held by them to be perfectly credible. I now request permission to introduce that deposition as evidence. Its value can be tested by unmistakable means. If it should be found to constitute an indisputable link in the general chain of evidence, it stamps itself with truth: but if, on the other hand, it should be found irrelevant and unsupported by collateral facts, it can easily be discarded; and your lordship will direct the jury, as well as their own discrimination will tell them, whether or not they are to attach any importance thereto."

The counsel for the prosecution objected to the production of such evidence; and the judge himself appeared to consider it inadmissible: but the foreman of the jury expressed a hope that in a matter where a fellow-creature's life was concerned, no objection would be raised against the production of the evidence alluded to. The judge accordingly ruled in favour of its production; and the reader may conceive how breathless was the suspense which prevailed in the court—how deep was the anxiety of Lettice Rodney, who had remained in perfect ignorance of the nature of the defence to be set up on her behalf—and how serious were growing the guilty Mrs. Webber's apprehensions.

The counsel for the defence unfolded a document which lay before him, and then spoke as follows:—

"This deposition is to the effect that the female who made it, was in the town of Liverpool on the same night that the murder was committed. She was wandering about, when her wayward steps led her up a narrow lane into which open the yard-gates belonging to that row of houses where Mr. Pollard dwelt. She heard one of these gates open and shut; and with some feeling of curiosity which she cannot define, she remained at that gate. Voices were speaking immediately inside: they were conversing in an under-tone—but she listened,

and overheard every syllable that was spoken. One voice was that of a man—the other that of a woman. The woman said she had just discovered that there was a mint of money in the iron safe: the man said he supposed therefore the job was for that night. The woman assented, and spoke of having waited for positive information whether Mr. Pollard had got the money in the house to pay to Mrs. Rayner. After some little more conversation, the witness overheard the man say something about the means that had been adopted to get the woman into her position as Pollard's housekeeper; but all that was said upon this point is not clearly remembered by the witness. The woman addressed the man as Barney; and the name of Bill Scott was two or three times mentioned. The witness tarried at the gate until it suddenly opened—and then she hurried away. But hearing the man follow her, she was apprehensive of mischief: she accordingly crouched down under the wall—he passed close by her side, but happened not to come in contact with her; and as the lane was involved in total darkness, he beheld her not. Such, my lord and gentlemen," concluded the counsel for the defence, "is the deposition of the witness who for the reasons stated cannot appear in your presence: and those same reasons will account for the fact of her having abstained from declaring to the authorities all she knew, until a few chance words which she the other day let drop, caused an inquiry to be made, and led to the sifting of the matter."

It would be impossible to describe the sensation which prevailed in the court during and after the reading of this deposition. Lettice Rodney clasped her hands together—the tears ran down her cheeks—she was well nigh overpowered by her emotions. Mrs. Webber grew pale as death; and her troubled looks were flung nervously around, to ascertain the impression made by this document. The counsel for the prosecution was astonished—a feeling in which the judge and jury evidently participated; and the spectators showed by their countenances that their opinions were undergoing a rapid change, turning in Lettice Rodney's favour and therefore against Mrs. Webber.

"I will now read from my instructions," said the counsel for the defence, "the description which the prisoner has given her legal adviser of the two ill-looking persons whom she alleges to have seen with Mr. Pollard's housekeeper on the memorable night of the foul tragedy which has led to this judicial inquiry."

The barrister accordingly read the personal descriptions of the Burker and of Bill Scott; and when he had finished, he said, "At this stage of the proceedings I will call back the witness whom I just now sent out of court—I mean the detective officer."

This witness was accordingly re-summoned; and on again making his appearance, he was desired by the counsel for the defence to describe the persons of Barney the Burker and of Bill Scott—the two individuals whom he had seen on several occasions enter the alley communicating with the Smedleys' abode. That description tallied to a nicety with the one given by Lettice Rodney, and ere now read from the barrister's instructions.

But there was still another witness forthcoming for the defence; and this was the landlord of the low public-house, or boozing-ken, at which Barney and Bill Scott had lodged when they were at Liverpool. The public-house itself was in the close vicinage of the late Mr. Pollard's abode; and the landlord proved that the time when the Burker and his acolyte lodged beneath his roof, was precisely that when the murder was committed. He even recollected that they were out late on the particular night itself, and that they took their departure at a very early hour in the morning: but he had not then the faintest idea that they were the authors of the crime, inasmuch as it appeared to be so completely brought home to Lettice Rodney.

Scarcely was the landlord's evidence given, when a person entered the court and handed a paper to the counsel for the defence. It was now six o'clock in the evening—the trial had lasted the whole day—and several hours had elapsed since Mrs. Webber first appeared in the witness-box.

"I have yet something to submit to the Court," said the counsel for the defence. "The detective officer who is in attendance here, instructed his brother-detective who was engaged with him in the metropolis in the same case, to be at the London terminus of the railway this day, so that he might be in readiness to act according to any instructions telegraphed up to him. At the outset of her evidence in the morning, the woman Webber stated that she had some time back been in the service of certain deceased ladies, whom she named. Upon this answer being given, a gentleman in court—who from humane motives is interested in the case—sped to the electric telegraph office, and sent up certain instructions to the detective in London. These were promptly acted upon: the results of certain inquiries have been telegraphed down to Liverpool; and the paper containing them, has just been placed in my hand. Though the ladies whom the woman Webber named, have ceased to exist, yet their families still live, and still occupy the same dwellings. The answers they gave to the queries put to them by the detective officer in London, furnish a complete refutation to the woman Webber's statements in respect to her ever having occupied situations in the service of the deceased ladies."

The counsel for the defence handed the telegraphic despatch to some one near, that it might be passed to the clerk of the court; and when it had been read, the barrister observed, "My lord, and gentlemen of the jury, without another syllable *that* is my case!"

All eyes were now turned upon the counsel for the prosecution; and this gentleman, rising from his seat, simply remarked that he had done his duty in placing the charge before the court in the first instance according to the instructions he had received—but he significantly added that after the turn which matters had taken, he should not for a moment think of exercising his right to reply to the case for the defence. This announcement was received with a certain sensation indicative of applause, which the ushers of the court did not attempt to suppress: for they themselves doubtless had their feelings enlisted in the same startling drama which thus for so many hours had been commanding so vivid an interest. The judge said but a few words in charge to the jury,—merely

remarking that he believed their course to be plain and simple enough. They were of the same opinion: for after only five minutes' consultation, and without leaving the box, they returned a verdict of "Not Guilty."

Although this decision was expected by Lettice Rodney, yet the instant it was delivered she was so overwhelmed by her feelings that she sank down in a swoon, and was thus borne out of court. At the same time Mrs. Webber was given into custody, charged with the crime for which Lettice Rodney had been tried: but it was understood that the infamous woman should not be placed upon her own trial until the Autumn Assizes. The reason was not specified in court: but every one comprehended that the delay was agreed upon in order that time might be allowed for the capture of her two accomplices, Barney the Burker and Bill Scott.

Before concluding this chapter, we may as well observe that Mr. Redcliffe was the unnamed gentleman who had employed the detectives to watch the proceedings and movements of Mrs. Webber. It was in consequence of the information from time to time received from those officers, about the visits of Barney and Bill Scott to the alley communicating with the Smedleys' house, that he had dropped certain hints to Sir William Stanley, both in his letters and his conversation, relative to circumstances corroborative of Lettice Rodney's innocence. It will be likewise understood wherefore in that interview with Lettice which we have described, Mr. Redcliffe questioned her so particularly with regard to the two ill-looking men whom she had spoken of as Mrs. Webber's accomplices. We may likewise add that when Captain Stanley left the court at the earliest stage of Mrs. Webber's examination, it was for the purpose of transmitting to the metropolis the telegraphic message which brought back the information of that woman's mendacity in respect to the former situations she had filled.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

LOW LIFE IN LONDON.

It will be remembered that Captain Stanley had expressed to his uncle Sir William, his desire to be of service to Mr. Redcliffe in those proceedings which the latter gentleman had so secretly but so judiciously carried on. The Captain's offer had been duly mentioned to Mr. Redcliffe; and it was in pursuance of a hint received from the generous philanthropist that Captain Stanley set off to London by the first train which started after the trial.

Mr. Redcliffe purposed to remain a few days longer with his friend Sir William Stanley, in order that he might adopt some measures for the future welfare of Lettice Rodney, and to place her in a position which would save her from the chance of being driven by poverty back again into the way of life which she had been leading at Madame Angelique's. As Mr. Redcliffe therefore could not immediately return to the metropolis, he had hurried off Captain Stanley in the manner described, in order that this gentleman might assist the detectives, and co-operate with them to the best of his ability, in ferreting out the Burker and Bill Scott.

Captain Stanley reached London early in the morning; and after a few hours' rest, he proceeded in the forenoon to call upon the lieutenant-colonel of his regiment, who was likewise then in the metropolis. This was none other than Lord Charles Meredith, the brother of Octavian. He was residing with his father the Marquis of Penshurst; and though he had reached so high a rank in the army, he was but twenty-seven years of age. Captain Stanley received a kind welcome from his superior officer, with whom indeed he was on most intimate terms; and he explained the business that had brought him to London.

"But do you not think, my dear fellow," inquired Lord Charles, "that the detectives are a thousand times more likely to discover these miscreants than you are?"

"I am not so sure of that," responded Stanley. "These villains will be so completely on their guard that they may manage to elude the detectives for a long time to come."

"Then doubtless you have some plan in view?" said Lord Charles Meredith.

"I purpose to throw myself, as it were, every night into the lowest neighbourhoods, and to penetrate into the vilest dens, as if merely impelled by curiosity, or else under the pretence of discovering some one whose fictitious description I shall render as different as possible from that of either of the real objects of my search. By these means I may possibly light upon them; and if not, there will be no harm done."

"But you have never seen either of these ruffians?" said Lord Charles.

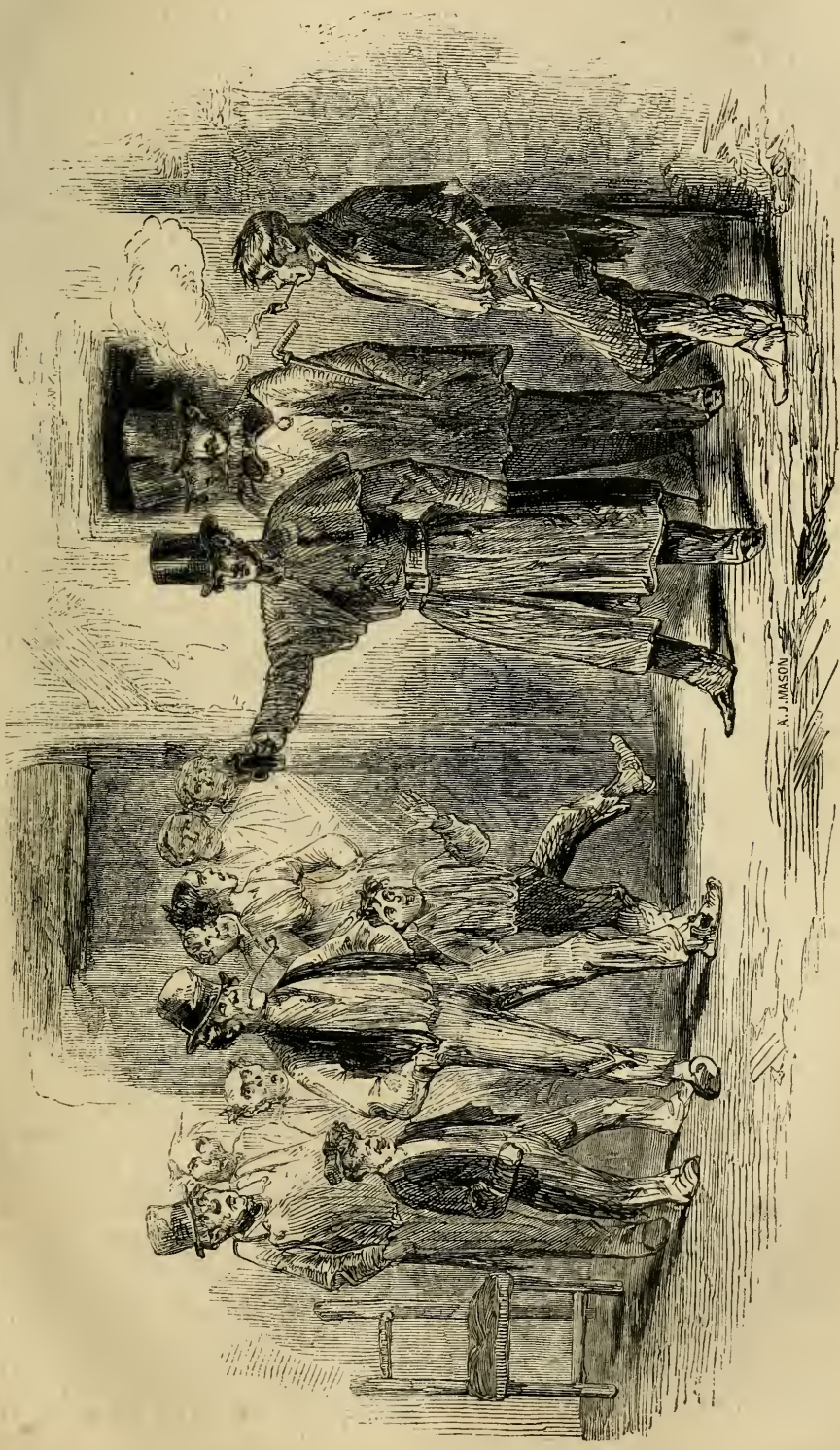
"No—it is true," rejoined Captain Stanley: "but I have received from the detective so minute and accurate a description of them, that I am convinced I should recognise them in a moment."

"I have a very great mind to bear you company in your search—or at least for the coming night," said Lord Charles Meredith. "I have heard and read much of those loathsome neighbourhoods and hideous dens where poverty and crime herd together—and I should like to see them."

"It was in the hope you would be my companion, that I have sought you now," replied Captain Stanley.

The two officers then settled their arrangements: it was agreed that they should dine together in the evening, and afterwards set out upon their excursion.

A little after ten o'clock they might have been seen wending their way towards Westminster Bridge together. Although it was the middle of summer, the night was cold and inclement: a drizzling rain made the shop lights and the street lamps appear as if they were seen through a mist. The daughters of crime were standing under doorways, or huddling together at the entrances of courts; while the ragged and half-starved children of poverty were dragging themselves shiveringly along to the resorts and dens where they harboured at night—or else to such places as would afford them any kind of shelter against the chilling and damping atmosphere. Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley, protected by their paletots,


A. J. MASON

and smoking their cigars, boldly faced the inclement night. The lieutenant-colonel was not unlike his brother Octavian,—being of the middle height and of slender figure: he likewise wore a moustache—but his hair was somewhat darker. He had a military look, and was altogether a personage of prepossessing appearance. Such was the companion whom Captain Stanley had found for his present excursion.

Having crossed Westminster Bridge and passed some little way down the Waterloo Road, they plunged into the maze of close streets, alleys, and courts which lie in that neighbourhood. Presently they encountered a police-constable; and him they accosted. Captain Stanley acquainted the officer in a few words with the business which they had in hand; and desired his succour. The request was backed by a piece of gold; and an affirmative answer was at once returned.

"Follow me, gentlemen," said the constable; "and I will soon show you a little of low life in London."

He led them along two or three narrow and obscure streets; then he turned into a court, which was but feebly lighted by the rays struggling through the dingy window-panes of the sombre-looking houses. Two or three of the front-doors stood open; and women loosely apparelled, and with looks of brazen immodesty, stood upon the thresholds. They flung forth filthy gibes and obscene jests at the passers-by; and when the policeman roughly bade them hold their tongues, they vomited forth torrents of abuse,—closing their doors at length, but only to open their windows and continue their hideous outpouring. The constable led the two officers to the extremity of the court, and knocked sharply at a door which was shut. It was speedily opened by a wretched-looking old man; and without the slightest ceremony, the police-officer entered, followed by Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley. Pushing open a side-door, and abruptly drawing forth his bull's-eye, or lantern, the constable threw the light into the room: but there was no one there. An inner door however immediately opened; and it vomited forth so loathsome a flood of human nature, that the two officers gazed with mingled horror and dismay on those hideous specimens of the lowest of both sexes.

The room into which they thus poured themselves, was almost entirely denuded of furniture: but that from which they had emerged, had the floor almost completely covered with filthy mattresses; and both had their walls and ceilings as grimy and blackened as if the whitewasher's brush had never touched them. Old men and boys—elderly women and young girls, formed this motley group, a glance over which sent a sickening sensation to the heart. Rags and filth—the stamp of poverty and the impress of crime—misfortune and vice—ugliness and deformity in all their most revolting shapes—together with the brazen hardihood of female depravity, were the jumbled characteristics of this loathsome scene.

"Now, gentlemen," said the police-constable, "is the person you want amongst these?"

"No: he is a boy of about curteen, with a sickly appearance, and very sharp features," answered Captain Stanley, who thus had his tale ready.

Significant looks were rapidly exchanged amidst the motley crew,—these looks being as much as to imply that the individual so described was not any where upon the premises, nor was he indeed known to them,—which was not astonishing, inasmuch as the pretended object of the search was of Captain Stanley's own imaginative creation. But the visitors observed that a young woman, on hearing that description, disappeared from among the group; and returning into the inner room, she issued forth by a door opening into the passage. She hastened up-stairs; and a door was speedily heard to open and shut on the first landing.

"Well, gentlemen," said the police-constable, "if the boy is not here, we must look into the rooms up-stairs."

"You won't find him," said the old man who had opened the front door, and who had lingered in the passage: he was the landlord of this loathsome lodging-house.

"We sha'n't take your word for it, Mr. Dyson," said the constable, purposely assuming a decided air. "I know you of old; and there is not a better keeper of a padding-ken in all London than you are for stalling off us policemen."

The old man grumbled something; and the constable led the way up the staircase. The other floors were visited; and they abounded in similar specimens of lost, degraded, and demoralized humanity as those which were seen below. That small house, which according to its size would have only just sufficed for the residence of a decent family of half-a-dozen in number, contained a swarm of at least fifty persons, huddling and herding together like so many swine—breathing an atmosphere which seemed fraught with pestilence—and rendering the entire place a hotbed for all the elements of plague, cholera, and the fearfullest epidemics.

The police-constable and the two officers issued forth from the house, and were speedily outside the court.

"Did you observe, gentlemen," asked the constable, "that girl who suddenly disappeared from the ground-floor rooms and hurried up-stairs——"

"Yes. What was her object?"

"It was to tell those above that it was all right—that they might make themselves easy, for it was none of them who were wanted. Suppose for argument's sake that you had given a true description—inadvertently letting it slip out of your mouth,—and suppose that the person who was really wanted had been all the time up-stairs,—the warning would have been quickly given, and an escape effected by a back window, or perhaps a trap-door on the top of the house. Ah! gentlemen, you don't know what dodges the keepers of these padding-ken are up to for the purpose of helping those who lodge with them."

The police-officer now conducted Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley to another house in the same neighbourhood, and where suppers were going on in every room. It was the resort of beggars and tramps, and was seldom frequented by thieves,—the mendicants who patronized it, endeavouring to keep it as "select" as possible! For there are aristocracies, grades, and distinctions even amongst the lowest strata of society, and amidst the whole range of demoralization's sphere. In every room throughout this lodging-house, the

tables were covered with immense joints and dishes of vegetables: the knives and forks were all chained to the tables; the beer was drunk out of the commonest brown mugs—for no publican would trust his pewter pots within the walls of that place. The atmosphere was of the sickliest description—hot, fetid, and nauseating—made up of the breaths of many persons, the odours of the damp rags which wrapped their forms, the steam of the greasy viands, and the strong smell of the vegetables. But what hideous objects were the beings who were thus banquetting! The blind, the halt, and the maimed—the paralyzed and the consumptive—as well as the hale, lusty, and strong—the sturdy beggar who obtains charity by coercive insolence, and the whining one who elicits it by his piteous tale—the one who for twenty years has always had a wife and five small children perishing at home—the woman who every day for the last dozen years has had a husband lying dead and no money to bury him—the girl of sixteen who ever since she was ten has told the same tale of having only just come out of the hospital and got no home nor father or mother—that great hulking fellow in a ragged seaman's garb, whose daily narrative of shipwreck and loss of all he possessed, has won for him five shillings in the course of a few hours' wandering—the sanctimonious-looking, calculating vagrant, whose diurnal reckoning is that from eleven to five he can traverse sixty streets and in every street pick up at least a penny, so that his daily income is likewise five shillings—the elderly woman dressed in widow's weeds, who every day for the last five-and-twenty years has just lost an excellent husband and been thrown out of a once happy home—the ingenious fellow who in the winter-time is a starved-out gardener, and in the summer-time a factory operative suffering from the badness of the times,—all these, and other varieties of imposture and mendicant roguery, were fully represented at this congress of joyously feasting beggars.

On quitting the scene which we have just described, the constable conducted the two officers to the large tap-room of a public-house situated in the neighbourhood of a saloon where theatrical representations, singing, and dancing take place. Previously to entering this tap-room, the policeman informed Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley that every individual whom they would see there was a noted thief—and that there would not be one present who had not figured in the police-courts—many at the sessions—some at the Old Bailey—and all more or less often upon the treadmill. With this information the place was entered: a few knowing winks were bestowed upon the police-constable; but apart from these familiar signs of recognition, little attention was paid to the visitors. The frequenters of that place were accustomed to behold "swells," as they denominated them, drop in to see a little of London life—or, on the other hand, to search after some thief who had exercised his manipulating skill upon them. All the varied and manifold impressions which villany and crime, in their different grades and degrees, can stamp upon the human countenance, might be discerned in that room;—and, heavens! what a study for the phrenologist! Wherefore go to Newgate to inspect the plaster casts of the countenances of defunct criminals, when there are these haunts in London where the faces of shoals of living evil-doers can be studied, and with all the more fearful accuracy—with all the more frightfully real intensity, inasmuch as the worst and darkest passions which are known to the human soul can be then observed working upon animated features and in their most hideous vitality.

At the numerous tables in this room the company were seated,—all of them smoking, and all drinking too—but the liquors were varied according to tastes and pecuniary resources: so that passing through those grades which were represented by the daring burglar—the bold thief—the cunning larcenist—the pitiful area-sneak—or the miserable pudding-stealer,—a corresponding gamut might be specified in the form of steaming punch—tumblers of hot spirits-and-water—quarterns of gin—pots of ale—and pints of porter. In this delectable place Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley remained for about half-an-hour,—at the expiration of which they took their departure, still accompanied by the police-officer. Three or four other dens of depravity were visited; and it was now past midnight: but as yet not the slightest sign was discerned of the objects of their search. They did not of course think it of the slightest use to visit the house in which the Burker and the Scotts had been wont to live, nor to take the slightest trouble in watching the premises of the Smedleys: for there could be little doubt that the Burker and Bill Scott had kept out of the way at the time they must have known the trial was coming on at Liverpool, so as to be on their guard in case of a result perilous to their own personal safety. And now, too, that the intelligence of this result had arrived in London, it was all the more certain that the ruffian and his guilty accomplice would have taken the best possible precautions to elude the search which was sure to be instituted after them.

Captain Stanley and Lord Charles now held a consultation with the police-constable: for a certain idea had struck the first-mentioned gentleman; and he thus expressed himself:—

"Thanks to your assistance, constable, we have received the initiative into the various phases which the haunts of crime, vice, poverty, and debauchery exhibit. But it strikes me there must be places which such villains as those of whom we are in search, would specially seek under existing circumstances, and whence the very first glimpse of a police-officer's uniform would scare them away. Now, are not these likewise places into which it may be possibly sought to inveigle those well-dressed persons who might chance to be in the neighbourhood?"

"Yes—there are such places," replied the constable: "but it would be next to madness for you to seek to penetrate into them. You would risk your life: but even if you escaped with that, you might reckon with certainty upon being robbed and ill-treated."

"Nevertheless," rejoined Captain Stanley, "only show me such a place as we have been speaking of, and I will risk everything!"

"And I assuredly am not the man to flinch from such danger," said Lord Charles Meredith. "But there is one thing to be thought of. If it be pos-

sible for us to obtain admission to such a place, would not the detectives themselves assume a particular apparel and penetrate thither?"

"Bless you, sir," answered the constable; "those kind of villains would recognise the detectives in a moment, no matter how disguised. They are keen and cunning enough to distinguish between real gentlemen, such as you are, and other persons drest up to play the part of gentlemen. That you can get into these haunts of which we are speaking, there is little doubt: indeed you are pretty sure to be invited there by those who would at once mark you as their prey. But I again warn you of the risk you will have to run; and unless you are well armed——"

"We took that precaution before we set out," interrupted Captain Stanley. "We have each a brace of double-barrelled pistols and a good clasp-knife upon our persons."

"And this stick of mine," added Lord Charles Meredith, "though it seems only a gentleman's walking-cane, is a life-preserver and well loaded at the top."

"Then you are decided, gentlemen?" asked the constable, still with a hesitating and dubious manner: "for recollect that I cannot accompany you."

"We are decided," said Captain Stanley. "Lead the way as far as you consider it prudent to conduct us, in order to show us the route."

The constable accordingly struck into another labyrinth of low streets, alleys, and courts, all of which he assured Lord Charles and Captain Stanley were swarming with loathsome life like a morass with reptiles; and the two gentlemen soon lost every idea of their whereabouts. At length the constable stopped short in the middle of a narrow street, feebly lighted with gas-lamps, and where the houses all had a dark and sinister appearance.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I must accompany you no further—or my presence may frustrate the object you have in view. Proceed to the end of this street—take the turning to the right and the second to the left. If you could make a pretence of being in liquor, it will serve your purpose all the better. I need tell you no more: for if anything happens to forward your views, it will take place somewhere about the spot to which I am directing you—and you will be enabled to judge for yourselves."

Another liberal donation rewarded the police-constable for his civility and his assistance; and he then parted company from Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley.

CHAPTER XLIX.

MOTHER BAMBRIDGE'S ESTABLISHMENT.

Following the constable's directions, the two adventurous military officers took the turn to the right and then the second to the left,—this latter bringing them into an alley which was very narrow at its entrance, but suddenly widened somewhat as they advanced into it, from the fact of the houses being built farther back on either side. These houses which thus stood back, were higher than those at the entrance of the alley, and they had wooden fences in front, enclosing what were meant to be little bits of garden, about a couple of yards wide.

Midway down the alley stood two public-houses, nearly fronting each other: or to be more particular still, one was a public-house and the other a beer-shop. Over the former was a flaring gas-light—over the latter a lamp of more modest pretensions: but the two together illumined all that part of the alley. Lights were still burning in several of the adjacent houses; and as the drizzling rain had by this time ceased, there was no misty veil to obscure the light thus thrown forth. From both public-house and beer-shop the sounds of uproarious revelry pealed forth, and in such discordant strains as to leave a doubt in the minds of the two officers whether there was not as much wrangling as merriment in the din which thus smote their ears. In front, too, of both these houses of entertainment several loose women,—some apparelled with flaunting pretension—were loitering in company with men who were dressed in what may be termed a "swellish style."

A little beyond the beer-shop, a black doll with a piece of white calico wrapped round, doubtless to serve as a frock, swung over the door of a rag and bottle shop,—the windows of which displayed pictures in rudely executed water colours, representing plum-puddings, as an intimation that housewives by means of thrift in disposing of their dripping, their rags, and their broken glass, might at the end of the year save up sufficient to provide the Christmas comestible thus illustrated. Nearly opposite the shop just named, was a marine-store dealer's; and both establishments were open, although it was now close upon one in the morning. The light of candles shone dimly forth from the doorways; and every now and then an individual—male or female—might be seen coming from the opposite extremity of the alley and diving abruptly into one or the other of these shops,—having however in the first instance cast a rapid glance of scrutiny around, to make sure that no police-constable was nigh. It required no prompting beyond what their own common sense suggested, to enable the two officers to judge that both the marine-store dealer's and the rag-shop were in reality receptacles for stolen goods, and that it was for the accommodation of their patrons they thus kept open so late.

Mindful of the friendly constable's advice, Captain Stanley and Lord Charles Meredith affected to be somewhat the worse for liquor as they advanced within the sphere of light.

"Where the deuce have our wandering steps brought us?" exclaimed Stanley, purposely speaking loud enough to be overheard by the loiterers in front of the two houses of entertainment.

"I have no more idea than the man in the moon," responded Lord Charles. "It was all owing to that last bottle of wine——"

"Well, never mind!" cried Stanley, with a well-assumed manner of devil-me-care rakishness. "We *must* get somewhere at last—that's very certain."

They were now both surrounded by the flauntingly dressed women whose bullies and flash men purposely hung back, thinking it better to keep aloof until the girls should have got the "swells" in regular tow.

"Treat us to a glass of wine," said one: "there's a dear fellow!"

"Or what is better, come home with us," exclaimed another, "and we'll send out for the wine."

It naturally struck the two gentlemen that this was the sort of scene to which the constable had alluded when he had said that they would be enabled to judge for themselves whether their desired object would be forwarded in this alley to which he had directed them. They therefore made up their minds simultaneously, and as if by tacit understanding, to accompany the girls: but they pretended to hesitate in a tipsy manner for some little time before they gave a final assent. At length they moved slowly along in the direction whither a couple of the flauntingly apparelled creatures led them; and a glance over their shoulders showed that there was a move amongst the flashily dressed men in front of the public-houses. The girls conducted them to the farther extremity of the alley, where they stopped at the door of a house of considerable size in comparison with the others in the same neighbourhood. One of the girls knocked at the door in a manner that was evidently peculiar, and therefore intended to serve as a signal—but which would not have been noticed if the two officers were really in their cups, as they pretended to be. The summons was answered by a tawdrily dressed elderly woman, in a gown of rusty black silk, a cap flaunting with pink ribbons, and with a gold chain—or at least a very good imitation of one—hanging over her enormously protruberant bust. Her naturally rubicund countenance had upon it a still deeper flush, produced by recent potations; and she simpered and smiled with an air of half-tipsy vacancy. She bade the gentlemen walk in,—whisperingly asking whether they chose to be accommodated with separate chambers at once?

"We are going to drink a bottle of wine first," answered Captain Stanley, who did not consider it expedient to be parted from his companion.

"By all means!" said the mistress of the establishment: and she led the way into a back parlour of some dimensions and tolerably well furnished.

The two girls who had accompanied the officers, flung off their bonnets and shawls; and Captain Stanley, still preserving his tipsy air, tossed a couple of sovereigns upon the table, desiring that wine might be fetched. An elderly servant-woman entered the room to receive the order from the mistress of the establishment, who had likewise seated herself there; and after a few minutes' absence she returned with a couple of bottles of wine. She handed all the balance of the money to Mother Bambridge—as the mistress was called—and which sum of thirty shillings Mother Bambridge coolly consigned to her own pocket. Glasses were placed upon the table: but both Stanley and Meredith were careful not to touch a drop of the wine until they had first seen Mother Bambridge and the girls empty their own glasses. Being thus satisfied that the liquor was not previously drugged, the two officers began to drink in order to keep up appearances; and they likewise chatted away as if in a reckless strain of dissipated hilarity.

Half-an-hour passed; and the gentlemen began to think that they had got into the midst of some adventure that was quite different from what the advising constable had anticipated, and that it was by no means of a nature to throw them in the way of the attainment of their object. But all of a sudden something was said by one of the girls, which turned all their thoughts into a new channel.

"This sherry is capital!" were the words thus spoken. "Wouldn't poor Barney like a glass?"

Rapid was the deprecating glance which Mother Bambridge flung upon the girl, as much as to give her to understand that she should not have mentioned a name which might possibly be recognised by the two gentlemen in connexion with the newspaper report of the previous day's trial at Liverpool: and then, with a simpering air, she said to Meredith and Stanley, "It's a poor dear invalid brother of mine that the kind-hearted young lady is alluding to; and with your permission I will just step up-stairs to him with a glass of this wine, which is sure to do him good."

"By all means!" exclaimed Lord Charles, now looking more tipsy than ever; "and send out to get us a fresh supply."

Thus speaking, he in his turn tossed from a well-filled purse a couple of sovereigns upon the table; and Mother Bambridge, having given a suitable order to the servant, poured out a glass of wine, and therewith quitted the room. The reader will comprehend the significancy conveyed by the words of the girl who had recommended the wine to be carried up to the man whom she had named. It was to afford Mrs. Bambridge a feasible pretext for leaving the room in order to make whatsoever arrangements she might deem necessary for the plunder of her guests—and all this without the risk, as it was hoped, of exciting their suspicions. Meredith and Stanley penetrated the manœuvre promptly and clearly enough: but affecting to become more and more influenced by the effects of liquor, they played their game so admirably as to prevent the slightest misgiving from entering the minds of the two girls. The name of Barney had been unmistakably pronounced; and as it was not altogether a common one, and was precisely the familiar appellation by which the principal object of their search was known—moreover, as it was in some such low neighbourhood as this that they had hoped and expected to fall in with him—and likewise as Mother Bambridge's look of warning significancy must be taken into account,—they were morally certain that the individual alluded to was he whom they sought. But there were evidently a number of desperate characters about—succour would be promptly at hand—the utmost caution must be used; and thus they could not instantaneously adopt any measure towards accomplishing his capture. Sudden violence on their part might fail: and therefore they must wait yet a little while and trust to circumstances. But we must observe that all the time Mother Bambridge was absent, Stanley listened attentively to catch the sounds of her footsteps—though he appeared to drink as if being intent on nothing of the sort.

The girls dropped several hints about retiring: but it by no means suited the two gentlemen's views to be separated; and moreover they had an excellent excuse for remaining where they were,

at least for the present, by reminding their frail companions that a fresh supply of wine had been sent for. In a few moments Mrs. Bambridge re-appeared; and almost immediately afterwards the woman-servant entered with two fresh bottles of wine. These were opened; and one of the girls officiously filled the two gentlemen's glasses: but the latter perceived that it was from the *first* supply, which was not completely exhausted, that the other glasses were replenished. They therefore at once comprehended that the wine last brought in *was* drugged.

"You do not drink?" said one of the girls, in a cajoling manner to Stanley.

"I am already tipsy enough," was the response, given in a hiccupping manner.

"Oh, no!—do try one more glass."

Stanley reached forth his hand: and with every appearance of drunken awkwardness he upset the glass.

"I'm sure you're not so clumsy," said the other girl to Lord Charles.

"Let's try," answered the nobleman: and lifting the glass, he spilt all its contents down his paletot.

Both the girls affected to laugh: but at the same time they darted suspicious looks towards Mrs. Bambridge.

"Who can sing a good song?" asked Stanley, with the hope of giving a turn to the proceedings and averting the suspicions which he saw were awakened.

"It just happens," replied Mother Bambridge, with her simpering air, "that there are three or four gentlemen—real gentlemen, like yourselves—in the front parlour; and they seem as much inclined as you to make a night of it. They sing capital songs; and with your leave I'll go and fetch them."

She quitted the room accordingly; and during her absence, which lasted two or three minutes, the girls again endeavoured to cajole the officers into retiring: but they were resolved not to be separated—and they vowed, with tipsy declamation, that they would not go to bed till daylight.

Mother Bambridge re-appeared, with the four "gentlemen" of whom she had spoken; and the two officers at once recognised some of the flashily dressed fellows whom they had seen hanging aloof behind the girls in front of the public-houses. The four bullies—for such indeed the new-comers were—themselves affected to be drunk; and sitting down, they began singing a bacchanalian song. The girls endeavoured to persuade Lord Charles and Stanley to drink of the last supply of wine—but as a matter of course, without effect. The looks which the women rapidly exchanged grew more and more suspicious, as the excuses of the officers for refusing to drink became proportionately more and more transparent,—their conduct now being so little consistent with that of tipsy men: and yet they had no alternative but to persist in the refusal, even at the risk of having their aim altogether frustrated.

"Come now," suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Bambridge, rising up from her seat; "I must have the house quiet—or else I shall stand the chance of being indicted. You must all be off to bed without any more delay."

A crisis was now reached: Lord Charles and Stanley knew full well that if they separated from each other, they were almost certain to become the prey of superior numbers: for they had no doubt that there were even more bullies at hand than those who were present; and their only chance of a successful resistance, in case of violence, was to keep together. But a thought suddenly flashed to Stanley's mind; and affecting to drop his pocket-handkerchief close to where Lord Charles sate, he pretended to fall completely upon him as he stooped to pick it up. This manœuvre afforded him the opportunity of rapidly whispering, "Let us suffer ourselves to be robbed without the slightest resistance."

"Come, do you hear?" cried Mrs. Bambridge: "off with you to bed!"

"If you won't let us sit up any longer," said Stanley, hiccupping at every word, "I shall go and finish the night at the public house."

"Bravo!" cried one of the four bullies: "and we'll go with you."

The door of the room was now opened: Stanley and Lord Charles rose staggeringly from their chairs, and with uneven steps walked into the passage,—a girl clinging to the arm of each. In the darkness of that passage, they each felt that their purses and watches were dexterously filched from them: they pretended not to notice it—the front-door was opened—and as they passed out, it was slammed behind them—neither bullies nor girls being now any longer in their company.

They walked away from the immediate vicinage of the place, and observed that both public-house and beer-shop were now shut up. This was of no consequence to them: for, as the reader may suppose, Stanley had all along no intention of adjourning to either of those places. The dawn of morning was now glimmering; and as they looked back, they perceived the head of one of the girls thrust out of an upper window. They made her an apparently friendly sign; and still staggering along, stopped short, as if in astonishment, before the shut-up public-house. Then, with the air of men who determined to carry their tipsy frolics to some place which was yet open, they passed out of the alley,—another glance thrown backwards, showing that the girl was still watching their movements.

"Now, my dear fellow," said Lord Charles Meredith, when they were out of the alley, and therefore out of view of the house which they had recently left, "pray explain yourself—for to tell you the truth, I cannot for the life of me understand this last proceeding on your part."

"It is easily explained," responded Stanley: "but we have yet much to do—and the most difficult as well as the most perilous part of our enterprise is still to be performed."

"Proceed: I am all attention," rejoined the nobleman. "But unless we get back our purses and our watches, it will be rather an expensive night's entertainment," he added with a laugh.

"Those we may give up for lost," answered Stanley: "but I think we may hold that loss cheap enough, if we succeed in surrendering a murderer into the hands of justice."

"But your project?" said Lord Charles, inquiringly. "Do you mean to go and fetch the police?"

"No. As we have commenced the business by ourselves," answered Stanley, "we will have the satisfaction of carrying it out. Listen, Meredith! We have excellent reason to believe that the villain Barney is in that house—and what is more, that he is in the room precisely above that where we were seated: for I was attentive to the sounds of Mother Bambridge's footsteps when she went up with the wine. These are great points gained—and far more than we could have expected as the result of the first night's search. But the first night's search shall be the last—or I am very much mistaken. I see that you do not understand me. Let us turn into this street; it is the one behind the alley from which we have emerged."

"And your reason for letting us be robbed so quietly?" inquired Lord Charles.

"Those bullies were evidently brought in to pounce upon us suddenly when Mother Bambridge hoped to persuade us to go up-stairs to bed. If, an attack being made, we had resisted them, we should have shown ourselves to be sober; and whether conquerors or conquered, the suspicion which our behaviour had already excited, would have been confirmed. The wretches would have felt convinced that we had an ulterior object: perhaps they would have supposed that we were looking for Barney: but at all events for security's sake they would quickly have got him off to some other lurking-hole. As it is, all suspicion is completely set at rest: they flatter themselves they had to do with a couple of gentlemen who were really tipsy; and rest assured that having watched us out of the alley, they are lulled into the completest security. Such is the result of our having suffered ourselves to be robbed so quietly, as you express it."

"And what do you think Mother Bambridge went up-stairs for to the villain's room? or how can you tell that it was his room at all?" asked the nobleman.

"Of course I can but surmise," responded Stanley; "and upon this surmise we must act. She doubtless went up to him to bid him be in readiness in case his services should be required to help in dealing with us. When she went out the second time to fetch in the bullies, it was really to the front parlour she proceeded: for I listened to the course that her footsteps took."

"Now, what is your plan?" inquired Lord Charles Meredith.

Captain Stanley rapidly explained it; and his noble friend unhesitatingly agreed to succour him in carrying it out.

The little colloquy that we have described, brought them to the extremity of the narrow street which they had entered, and which ran parallel to the alley. A very few minutes' observation showed them that the house which was immediately behind Mother Bambridge's establishment, was a small chandlery-shop; and Stanley observed to his noble friend, "This is all the better for our purpose; because a money-making tradesman of a mean and peddling description will forgive us for awakening him if we slip a five-pound note into his hand."

"I do verily believe, my dear fellow," answered Lord Charles, "that you have forgotten the little circumstance of our purses being left behind in the adjacent alley."

"No—I have not forgotten it," responded Stanley: and drawing forth his pocket-book from the breast of his under-coat, he displayed a roll of bank-notes.

They now knocked at the door of the chandlery-shop; and in a few minutes a head with a cotton-night-cap on, was thrust from an upper window. The owner of the head and the night-cap was about to give vent to his indignation at being knocked up by a couple of rakes, as he thought, out upon their nocturnal frolics: but a few quickly uttered words from Captain Stanley's lips, and the display of a bank-note, made a prompt change in the man's temper. He drew in his head—shut down the window—and in a couple of minutes appeared at his shop-door,—having just huddled on a sufficiency of clothing for decency's sake. He admitted the two officers, and then inquired their business.

Captain Stanley, closing the door of the shop, put the five-pound note into the man's hand; and said to him, "Don't be alarmed—and don't ask any unnecessary questions: but we want, in the first place, to peep through one of the back windows of your dwelling."

The chandler, who was an active, bustling, eccentric little man, stared in amazement at this request; and recurring to his former opinion that the whole proceeding was an impudent frolic, he examined the note, expecting to find that it issued from the Bank of Elegance instead of the Bank of England. On discovering however that it was really genuine, he became perfectly civil once more; and thinking he had better humour his two customers, whatever their object might be—if indeed they had any at all—he conducted them into his little parlour, which was behind the shop. There was an outside shutter to the window; and the prismatic rays of the morning light—for it was the middle of the month of June—penetrated through a heart-shaped hole in that shutter. By means of this hole Stanley was enabled to take his survey of the rear of the chandler's dwelling. There was a little yard separated by a low wall from a larger yard which belonged to Mother Bambridge's establishment: at every one of the back windows of that establishment the blinds were drawn down; and therefore it was reasonable to suppose that the inmates had retired to rest, well contented with their spoil in the shape of handsome watches, massive chains, and well-filled purses.

"Have you got a ladder?" inquired Stanley of the chandler.

The volatile little man made one bound of astonishment at this question so abruptly put; and then he looked dismayed as the idea flashed to his mind that he had to do with two lunatics just escaped from an asylum. The two supposed lunatics could not help smiling at these variations of expression on the chandler's countenance; and Stanley, perceiving the necessity of giving some sort of explanation, addressed him as follows:—

"My good fellow, I need not tell you that the place which we see opposite is a den of infamy. I and my companion have just been robbed there; and we mean to get in by some means or another, to compel the wretches to disgorge their plunder. Now will you assist us—or will you not?"

"Ah, that I cheerfully will!" exclaimed the

little man: "for that Mother Bambridge is the scandal of the neighbourhood, and never spends a single penny at my shop."

The ludicrous connexion of indignant morality and mortified selfishness which characterised the chandler's observation, provoked another smile on the part of the two officers: but he was now ready to render them his assistance—and that was the essential. He led them forth into his little yard, and showed them a ladder, which Stanley at a glance saw was just high enough for his purpose. The wall separating the two yards was quickly scaled by the Captain and Lord Charles—the chandler not offering to accompany them out of his own premises: for he was not endowed with a large amount of courage. The chief danger to be now apprehended, was that their proceedings might be observed from the infamous house, should any of the inmates be still up. Not a single blind however was seen to move: no sign was there of aught threatening to disturb them.

The ladder was placed against the window of the room over the parlour to which the two officers had been conducted when in the house; and Captain Stanley, with his right hand in his coat-pocket ready to draw forth a pistol, began to ascend the ladder,—Lord Charles Meredith remaining at the foot. On reaching the window, which had a dingy calico blind drawn down inside, the Captain immediately perceived that the sashes were not fastened; and this was an immense advantage in favour of the success of the enterprise. As noiselessly as possible did he begin raising the lower sash; and when he had thus lifted it about a foot, he raised the blind in order to peep in. A bed was near the window: a man lay upon it, with his clothes on; and on a chair by the side of that bed was a brace of pistols. The man was sleeping heavily: but a curtain concealed the upper part of his body—so that Captain Stanley could not discern his countenance; and the curtain was beyond the reach of his outstretched arm from the position where he now stood. He thrust up the sash a little higher, and was now enabled to reach the back of the chair on which the pistols lay. Lifting the chair completely up, he set it gently down again close within the window; and removing the pistols thence, consigned them to the pocket of his paletot. Then he beckoned Lord Charles Meredith, who attentively and anxiously watched his proceedings, to ascend the ladder.

The sash was raised yet a little higher; and still the man slept on as if he were under the influence of liquor. Stanley passed into the room; but the cord of the blind getting entangled round his foot, made him stumble against the chair. The man sprang up from the bed like a wild beast suddenly awakened from its lair; and the first glimpse of his countenance convinced Stanley that he was now confronted by none other than the terrible Burker himself.

The ruffian glanced towards the chair with the evident intention of snatching up his pistols; and perceiving they were gone, a cry of savage rage, like that of a hyæna, burst from his lips. Captain Stanley drew forth a pistol—presented it at the Burker's head—and bade him surrender or he was a dead man. But with the sudden fury of the wild beast unto whose howling cry we just now likened that of the ruffian, he sprang upon Stanley—hurled him upon the floor—seized the pistol from his grasp—and was on the very point of discharging its contents at his head, when his arm was caught in a powerful grasp—the weapon was wrested from him—and he himself in his turn was hurled upon the floor. All this was the work of a few seconds; and we need hardly inform the reader that it was Lord Charles Meredith who springing into the room, thus saved the life of his adventurous friend.

The very instant that the Burker was thus levelled, Lord Charles Meredith's knee was upon his chest: and the threat was repeated, that he must surrender or have his brains blown out. But the two officers had to deal with a man of the most desperate and determined character,—a man too who possessed the brute strength and courage of a lion. Hurling Meredith off him, he rose as far as his knees, when he was assailed by Stanley, whom he likewise dashed away; and then snatching up a chair, he hurled it with all his force at the head of Meredith who was returning to the assault. The nobleman however darted sufficiently aside to save his head, and received the blow upon his shoulder: but it made him stagger—and for an instant he was smitten with the idea that his arm was broken. All this too was but the work of a few instants,—during which however either one of the officers might have shot the ruffian dead: but it was by no means their purpose to save the hangman his duty, unless at the last extremity in defence of their own lives. As for Barney the Burker,—he dared not roar out for assistance, for fear of arousing the whole neighbourhood: but by hurling the chair at Meredith, he gained a moment's time to do that which seemed to answer his own purpose equally well: for he seized hold of a cord, which passing through a hole in the ceiling, hung against the wall; and a bell sent its clanging sound through the house.

"It is useless for you to resist!" exclaimed Stanley, again rushing upon the villain just as he was about to tear open the door: and at the same instant Meredith seized upon him by the other arm,—both now clinging to him with a desperate tenacity.

And desperate too were the struggles of the ruffian—diabolically savage was the expression of his features, as he endeavoured to bite his assailants; and were it not that his great clumsy shoes were off, he would undoubtedly have broken their legs with the tremendous kicks that he dealt. And now there were the sounds of numerous persons rushing about the house: the door was burst open—and the four bullies whom the two adventurous officers had already seen beneath that roof, rushed in. Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley were in a moment overpowered by numbers—they were made prisoners—and now, as the only chance left of ensuring the capture of the Burker, they both shouted with all their might for assistance. Vainly did they endeavour to release their arms from the grasp of the bullies that they might get at their pistols: they could not.

The instant the Burker was freed, he rushed to the window: but beholding the chandler in the adjoining yard, he fancied that a trap was set for him in that direction—and he resolved to escape

by the front door; for he felt assured that the whole neighbourhood would be quickly aroused. Snatching up his shoes, his cap, and his club, he darted from the room—rushed with the reckless brutal violence of a mad bull through the bevy of half-naked girls who were gathered in a fright on the landing—knocked down Mother Bambridge as she suddenly emerged from a ground-floor room in which she slept—and tearing open the front-door, darted forth. He ran along the alley with all his might: but just as he reached the front of the public-house, a couple of policemen emerged from a little court that led out from that part of the alley. Their strong arms clutched hold of the Burker; and as he offered a desperate resistance, the bludgeon of one of the officers dealt him a blow which rendered him powerless.

At the same moment Captain Stanley and Lord Charles Meredith—having managed to escape from the bullies with whom we left them in conflict, and at whose hands they had received no small amount of ill-treatment, though fortunately no serious injury—arrived upon the spot where the Burker was thus captured; and they had the gratification of finding that he was safe in the hands of the law's myrmidons after all.

CHAPTER L.

THE INTERVIEW.

Christian Ashton, on being dismissed from the employment which the literary mania of the Earl of Lascelles had furnished him, would have consulted Mr. Redcliffe as to the course which he should now adopt with a view to obtain another situation: but that gentleman was absent from London, relative to the trial of Lettice Rodney.

Our young hero visited his sister Christina, and acquainted her with everything that had occurred. He displayed so much grief at this sudden and cruel separation from Isabella Vincent—he spoke so fervidly of the love which he cherished towards her—and declared with such passionate vehemence that his happiness was entirely centred in that beauteous and charming creature, that Christina from her brother's words and manner acquired a somewhat deeper reading into the mysteries of her own heart; and she could now less than ever mistake the feeling which she herself entertained towards Lord Octavian Meredith. But she did her best to console and encourage her brother; and perhaps with this amiable purpose in view, she spoke more cheerfully of the hope which a faithful love might entertain than was perfectly consistent with the misgivings she secretly experienced on behalf of Christian's passion. For she could not help seeing that it was indeed most unlikely the Earl of Lascelles would ever consent to bestow his niece upon an obscure young man totally dependent on his own industry for his bread.

Nevertheless, as we have just observed—Christina—with the kindest of motives—spoke cheeringly to her brother; and he went away from that interview comforted, and with a sense of reviving hope. As he wended his way back towards his lodgings in Kensington, he felt himself gradually falling into those day-dreams in which youthful lovers are wont to indulge; and his thoughts flowed in something like the following channel:—

"Who can tell what the future may have in store for me? Heaven has often blessed the loves of those whose prospects at the outset were even darker than mine. Ah! if I could but obtain one more interview with Isabella—if we could once more exchange vows and protestations of eternal fidelity—I should feel happier: my mind would become more settled—and I should have a better heart to search after fresh employment. But as it is, I feel at a loss how to act: I can fix my thoughts upon nothing decisive. Oh, yes! to see her once more—to receive from her sweet lips the assurance that under no circumstances of persuasion or coercion will she ever become another's,—this indeed were happiness! Then, inspired with fondest and brightest hope, I could battle with the world;, and if industry and integrity ever throve by their own unassisted resources, I would assuredly carve out a position for myself. And who can tell but that the day will come when I may secure a competency, and thus feel myself justified in conducting Isabella to the altar? Our wants would be limited: a neat little rural habitation would suffice: and however humble its aspect, yet the light of love would gild the interior as if it were a splendid saloon, and impart a richer bloom to the flowers festooning outside. And we should be so happy—Oh, so happy!—and Isabella would never regret her uncle's palatial mansion."

Such reflections as these—which, as the reader may perceive, were borrowed from the fanciful realms of dream-land—wrapped the soul of the enthusiastic Christian in a species of ecstacy: but the pivot, be it observed, on which the whole vision turned, was the idea of first of all obtaining a parting interview with Isabella. He did not therefore immediately take any step to procure a new situation: nor did he for the present think of leaving his lodging in the vicinage of the Earl's mansion. He had plenty of ready money; and as his habits were frugal and inexpensive—his only extravagance consisting in the nicety and almost elegance of his apparel—he could subsist for some time on the resources which he had in hand. But how to obtain the interview with Isabella? This was the difficulty. For several days after he left the Earl's employment, he vainly busied himself in meditations upon the best means to carry out his view. More than once he thought of beseeching Lord Osmond's good offices: for it was evident to Christian that the young nobleman was far from unfavourable to the love-suit which had brought about so disastrous a catastrophe in the summer-house. But yet he applied not to Adolphus.

In the meanwhile the Countess of Lascelles and Lord Osmond had been particularly on their guard, for fear lest the old nobleman's suspicions should be revived. Nevertheless, Ethel continued to occupy those separate apartments which we have on a former occasion described; and on a variety of pretexts she avoided a return to the matrimonial couch. Lord Osmond deeply deplored Christian's departure from the mansion, as his presence there had caused a diversion in respect to Isabella which had thrown the young nobleman and Ethel constantly together. Now, since that catastrophe in the summer-house, Isabella had been almost constantly with the Countess; and Osmond began to despair of again enjoying Ethel's society alone.

As for the Earl himself,—he had been so bewildered by the incidents which led to Christian's summary dismissal, that for several days he knew not how to act or what to think. That his son and his niece were *not* lovers, as he had all along flattered himself, had suddenly been made apparent: that Christian and Isabella must have been far more together than he had supposed, was likewise evident: and that therefore Osmond must have been the companion of the Countess in the evening walks in the garden, was a natural deduction from those premises. Thus the old Earl was agitated with renewed suspicion: but a feeling of mingled pride and shame prevented him from again touching on the subject with his valet Makepeace, and likewise from taking any decisive step—such, for instance, as to insist that his son should again become an exile from the house.

At length Lord Osmond was determined to do something to bring about a change in affairs. His mad infatuation towards his youthful and lovely mother-in-law would not permit him to remain any longer so completely on his guard, nor to tolerate the almost complete severance from her which Isabella's presence in her ladyship's apartments necessitated. He spoke to Makepeace: but the valet could say nothing more than that the Earl maintained a strict silence with regard to recent events.

One morning—about ten days after Christian's abrupt dismissal from the house—Lord Osmond paid him a second visit at his lodgings. We have already said that our hero had more than once bethought himself of seeking the young nobleman's good offices towards obtaining an interview with

Isabella: but he hesitated,—fearful that he might be taking too great a liberty and trusting too far to the favourable feeling of the Earl's son. But now, when Lord Osmond entered his little sitting-room, Christian's countenance suddenly lighted up with mingled hope and joy.

"Still in the same place? and still without employment, my young friend?" said Adolphus, shaking Christian warmly by the hand.

"I cannot tear myself away from this neighbourhood," replied the youth, his cheeks glowing with blushes: "and now the truth is frankly told!"

"You entertain some hope?" said Lord Osmond. "Perhaps you wish to see Isabella——But of course you do!—it is natural enough!"

"Oh, for one parting interview!" exclaimed Christian enthusiastically; "and you know not, my lord, how deep would be my gratitude!"

"Well, we must manage it by some means or another," responded Adolphus. "Have you the courage to enter the grounds stealthily this evening, or to-morrow evening, on receipt of a note or message from me?"

Christian hesitated for a moment: the natural rectitude of his principles recoiled from the idea of thus violating the sanctity of premises whence he had been so pointedly dismissed. But a second thought told him that there was no more harm in entering the Earl's grounds against his consent, than in seeking an interview with his niece likewise in opposition to his will. Love therefore triumphed over all scruples; and he exclaimed, "Tell me how I can see Miss Vincent—if only for a few minutes—and I will risk everything. But think you, my lord, that she herself will be agreeable——"

"She loves you, Christian—and that assurance ought to be a sufficient answer. Hold yourself in readiness for a communication from me; and trust to my ingenuity to manage the matter. And now one word more ere I take my departure. You must look upon me as a friend, and regard me as such—even to the extent of making me your banker: for that is the proposal I have to offer without offending your delicacy."

Christian expressed his warmest gratitude for the young nobleman's kind consideration—but assured him that he possessed ample resources for the present. Adolphus then took his departure,—leaving the youth full of hope and joy at the prospect of so speedily obtaining the object of his enthusiastic wishes.

In the evening the Earl and Countess of Lascelles, Osmond, and Isabella were seated in the drawing-room between eight and nine o'clock partaking of coffee. Isabella was sad and dispirited, though she did her best to conceal what she felt: she was so afraid of angering her uncle. The Countess displayed the most amiable demeanour towards her husband, and was completely on her guard not to exchange so much as the most rapidly furtive glance with Adolphus. Lord Osmond chatted with every appearance of ease and gaiety; and as the Earl had drunk a few extra glasses of wine, he was in a much better humour than he had been since the adventure of the summer-house.

"Ah! now that I think of it, my dear father," said Lord Osmond, thus abruptly giving a turn to the previous conversation, "when are your memoirs to appear?"

"Why, the fact is, Adolphus," answered the Earl, "I have come well nigh to a full stop for the present: and without any disagreeable allusion"—and he glanced somewhat spitefully at his niece—"I have lost my right hand, as it were. Dictation was easy enough: but when I sit down to write for myself, I find my ideas rushing on—like what shall I say?——like a troop of wild elephants: but my penmanship can no more keep pace with them than—than—hem!—a lame donkey at a short trot."

"It is a great pity, my dear father," rejoined Adolphus, in an under-tone, so that Isabella could not overhear him, "that you have got rid of that very useful young man merely on account of a passing folly——"

"Don't mention it, Adolphus!" interrupted the Earl sharply: "he shall never enter my house again."

"Oh, no—of course not!" responded Lord Osmond, finding that the little feeler he had thrown out experienced such a rebuff. "But really it is cruel of you to keep the public on the tenter-hooks of suspense awaiting that work of yours, which has already been so extensively advertised. You must permit me to look out for another secretary——or else," added Lord Osmond, in the hope of putting his father into the most amiable of humours, "I must act as your amanuensis for an hour or two every day."

"No!—would you, Adolphus?" exclaimed the old Earl, catching eagerly at the proposition.

"With the utmost pleasure," was Lord Osmond's ready response. "We will commence to-morrow morning, if you will."

"That we will!" exclaimed the Earl, forgetting everything else in his joy at the sort of compliment conveyed by his son's supposed anxiety in respect to the forthcoming work. "I will go this minute to the library, and sit down for an hour or two to rack my imagination and invent——I mean arrange the papers in readiness for to-morrow."

"Pray do!" said Lord Osmond: "for I am now all eagerness to begin. And perhaps, as it is so sultry in-doors and the evening is so beautiful, the ladies would accept my escort for a ramble in the garden?"

The Earl made a passing grimace at the proposition—for he retrospected not lovingly upon those evening rambles: but as the thought flashed to his mind that his niece must remain the whole time in companionship with Adolphus and Ethel, he uttered not a syllable of objection, and hastened away to the library,—intent upon the concoction of some startling incident for the morrow's lucubrations. The Countess and Isabella rang for their shawls; and Lord Osmond, hurrying down stairs for a moment, sought Makepeace, to whom he made a significant sign, which that individual at once comprehended. The young nobleman then rejoined his mother-in-law and cousin; and they walked forth into the garden together.

As this was the first occasion since the disastrous incident of the summer-house that an evening ramble had been taken, or that the system of guarded conduct had been in the slightest degree deviated from, the Countess could not help thinking that Adolphus had some particular project in view: for he had found no opportunity during the day to communicate his intention to

her ladyship. Isabella, on the other hand, was too artless and innocent to entertain the idea of any ulterior purpose; and leaning upon her cousin's arm, she walked by his side in silence, occupied with her own melancholy reflections. To his other arm the Countess clung; and as the night was clear and beautiful, she and her lover were now enabled to exchange glances of deep and earnest tenderness.

It becomes necessary to explain that in one of the angles of the walls enclosing the spacious garden-grounds, there was a small private door, but which was seldom or never used. An avenue of evergreens led from this door towards the conservatories at the further extremity of the garden; and it was in this avenue that Osmond was now walking with the two ladies. At first there was little conversation: for Isabella was altogether silent—while Adolphus and Ethel were too much gratified with the opportunity of thus stealthily bestowing a tender pressure of the hand, or of exchanging a fond look when the starlight penetrated amidst the trees and flooded their path with its argentine lustre, to give utterance to remarks on purely indifferent subjects: for on such subjects alone could they converse in the presence of Isabella, who was altogether unsuspicious of their guilty love.

"You are pensive, my sweet cousin?" said Adolphus, at length breaking a long silence, and now addressing himself to Isabella. "The Countess and I are not so dull," he continued in a good-humoured strain, "as to be unable to comprehend what occupies your thoughts. We both feel for you, my dear cousin——"

"Isabella has already more than once received the assurance of my sympathy," remarked the Countess.

"But we should offer her more than sympathy," quickly exclaimed Lord Osmond. "There could be no harm in assisting the progress of this little love-affair, which experiences disfavour only on the part of *one:* for really Christian Ashton is an admirable young man——You are weeping, dear Isabella!"

"The conversation gives her pain," said the Countess, in a tone of tenderest sympathy.

"Not for worlds would I wilfully give you pain, my dear cousin," resumed Adolphus. "On the contrary!—you shall see whether I have not studied to do something to afford you pleasure."

"What mean you?" inquired the agitated, the astonished, and the bewildered girl, her heart fluttering with suspense.

"I mean, my dear cousin, that here is some one whom you may perhaps be glad to meet!"

These last words were spoken just as the little party reached the end of the avenue where the private door stood; and at the same moment a key was heard to turn in the lock of that door. It opened—and a faint cry of mingled surprise and delight burst from Isabella's lips, as she beheld Christian Ashton.

"We will leave you together for half-an-hour," said Lord Osmond: and he hurried the Countess away from the spot.

Isabella, well nigh overcome by her feelings, sank half-fainting into Christian's arms: he strained her to his breast, breathing the tenderest and most endearing words in her ear. He explained to her how he had earnestly longed for one parting interview—how Lord Osmond had kindly volunteered to procure it—and how a note enclosing a key of the gate, and instructing him in what manner to proceed, had been left a few minutes back at his lodgings. Who the person was that left it, Christian did not know: but we need hardly inform the reader it was the valet Makepeace.

And were not the lovers happy? and did they not feel themselves supremely blest? Was it likely that they should yield to timid apprehensions, and on that account cut short the pure pleasure—the chaste luxury—of this interview? Or need we say that the vows of eternal love which the enraptured youth sought from the lips of the tender maiden, were murmuringly whispered—that those vows were reciprocated—and that they were ratified with the purest and holiest kisses?

They walked together in that shady avenue for nearly an hour,—Adolphus and Ethel having thus well nigh doubled the interval to which the young nobleman had in the first instance limited the meeting; and during this space everything was forgotten by the youthful pair except the happiness of being thus together. So rapidly slipped away the time, that when Adolphus and Ethel again joined them, it seemed as if the interview had lasted but for five minutes instead of fifty. It was at the extremity of the avenue which was nearest to the conservatories that the youthful lovers were thus rejoined by Lord Osmond and the Countess of Lascelles; and it was here that they now separated. Isabella, again taking her cousin's arm, accompanied him and the Countess back to the mansion in one direction—while our young hero, hastily threading his way along the shady avenue, regained the garden-gate, whence he issued,—locking it again and taking the key with him. Had not his thoughts been entirely wrapped up in the ecstatic luxury of feeling which this interview had left behind it, he would most probably have been struck by a certain strange rustling amidst the adjacent evergreens:—but as it happened, he heard it not.

Meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles had retired to the library to make notes of whatsoever perilous escapes or marvellous adventures he could possibly concoct, and which were worthy of incorporation in those celebrated memoirs that were to throw Baron Munchausen into the shade. He however found his imagination more cloudy than he had expected: he rang for wine—but fresh potations appeared only to increase his dullness, instead of giving a spur to his inventive ingenuity. Thus an hour elapsed; and he had only got so far as to place himself between the fore-paws of a huge African lion, without being enabled to resolve upon the special means of his own extrication and his formidable adversary's defeat. He sate back in his chair, thinking: but gradually with his meditations there became mingled an undercurrent of thoughts which presently absorbed the others. This ramble in the garden assumed a suspicious aspect to his mind. He did not know what it could possibly mean; and yet he could not help thinking it meant something more than a mere stroll for the purpose of courting the evening breeze. Without entering into details in respect

to the old nobleman's ideas, we may as well at once state that his misgivings reached such a pitch he tossed down the pen—left himself, so far as his memoirs were concerned, in the grasp of the lion, with a boa-constrictor picturesquely thrown in, and represented as looking down from a tree ready to spring upon them both:—and issuing from the library, he stole into the garden, treading noiselessly amongst the evergreens. He drew near that very identical arbour where he had surprised Christian and Isabella, and where he had received so smart a blow upon the nose: but all was silent there. He diverged elsewhere; and now his wandering steps brought him in the immediate vicinage of the private door. Footsteps rapidly approaching along the avenue, fell upon his ear; and just at that spot close by the door, there were no high trees to intercept the starlight. All therefore was clear; and the ancient Earl popped down behind a shrub to see who the individual was that now approached the gate. It was Christian Ashton; and in the sudden surprise with which the nobleman was thus smitten, he gave such a start as to rustle the shrub:—but Christian heard it not. The Earl tarried where he was, crouching down like a frog: he perceived our hero insert the key in the lock—open the gate—pass forth—shut it again; and then the relocking thereof fell on his lordship's ear.

"Well, am I really awake?" asked the Earl of himself: "or is this a dream? I have either discovered something extraordinary to a degree; or else I am the silliest *young* dotard that ever existed."

Bewildered and confused, the Earl wended his way back to the library—filled a bumper—tossed it off—and threw himself back in his chair to meditate. Sleep stole upon him; and he was presently awakened by the entrance of Makepeace. His first impulse was to tell the valet everything that had happened: his second thought was to hold his tongue; for the idea slipped into his head that he had drunk too much wine and had been dreaming. He inquired what o'clock it was; and was told it was past eleven. Lord Osmond and the ladies had already retired to their respective chambers; and the Earl accordingly went up to his own. On entering his dressing-room, the first thing he did was to glance at a particular nail to which the key of the private garden-door was wont to be hung:—and there, sure enough, it was. Nor need this be at all astonishing to the reader,—inasmuch as Makepeace had during the day procured a counterpart key, in accordance with instructions given by Lord Osmond, who remunerated him liberally for everything he did.

But when the Earl thus caught sight of that key, his suspicion was strengthened to the effect that he had dreamt this new incident of the garden; and as nothing would have been more galling to his mean petty vanity than to appear ridiculous in the eyes of his servant, he breathed not a syllable relative to his supposed dream. Yet when Makepeace had retired, the Earl of Lascelles reflected more and more on the occurrence; and he was haunted by the apprehension that there *might* be something more in it than a mere dream—especially as it had occurred on the very evening that the garden-ramble was renewed.

"The key is certainly here," he said to himself; "and not for a moment would Makepeace remove it from its nail. I know the fellow is fidelity itself: I am too keen and shrewd to be deceived by any man's countenance. No one could have purloined the key, because Makepeace always keeps my dressing-room locked. But it is quite possible for that young scoundrel Ashton to have had a false key made. Perhaps he came of his own accord, hoping to see Isabella. Yes—it must have been so: for Adolphus could not possibly so far forget himself as to connive at such a proceeding. Very good, Master Ashton! So you will persist in looking after my niece—will you? We'll see if we can't put a stop to it. I'm almost sorry I didn't pounce upon him: but perhaps it is all for the best. I'll go to the magistrate in the morning—or I'll set a detective to watch. But no! there's something better than that——and, by Jove! I'll do it."

Whatever this last idea might have been, it certainly seemed to tickle the silly old nobleman's fancy very much: for he rubbed his hands and chuckled—grinning most ludicrously at the same time; and putting on his night-cap with the fringe of false hair, he sought his couch.

On the following day Lord Osmond, emboldened by the success of the previous evening's adventure, called upon Christian to inform him that he might, if he thought fit, have another interview with Isabella; and our hero, who was enthusiastically devoted to the charming girl, was only too willing to accept an offer which he believed to arise from the kindest and most disinterested feeling. During this same day, too, the Earl of Lascelles had a little private conversation with the under-gardener,—giving him certain instructions, and charging him to observe the strictest secrecy. This the man faithfully promised,—all the more readily too, as the Earl slipped a couple of guineas into his hand. The old nobleman, when in the presence of the family, suffered not his countenance to betray that there was any secret scheme which he was hatching: but nevertheless he was too full of it to be enabled to settle his mind to dictate to his son; and thus the proffered services of Adolphus were dispensed with. Indeed, so far as the memoirs were concerned, the Earl continued in the grasp of the lion, and the huge boa-constrictor was still coiled round the branch of the tree, waiting to spring.

When the evening came, the Earl and Countess, Lord Osmond and Isabella, were assembled as usual in the drawing-room to take coffee; and at about half-past eight o'clock, the Earl, rising from his seat, said that he should go to the library and prepare for the next day's work, as he was positively determined to proceed with his book on the morrow.

"And as the heat has prevented you from going out all day," said Adolphus to the ladies, "I offer, like a gay gallant, to escort you for a stroll in the grounds."

The proposal was accepted: the bell was rung for the shawls; and the Earl, chuckling with inward satisfaction, exclaimed, "Well, the evening is really beautiful; and instead of shutting myself up in the library, I will take a lounge with you."

Adolphus and Ethel were enabled, from a course of dissimulation, to maintain the strictest guard

over their looks at this most unexpected and ominous proposal: but Isabella turned pale and trembled. Fortunately however her countenance was not at the instant towards her uncle; and he perceived not her emotion. But the Countess did notice it; and hastening to assist Isabella with her shawl, she whispered rapidly, "Fear nothing! Adolphus will make everything right."

The Earl gave his arm to the Countess, while Lord Osmond escorted his cousin Isabella. They descended the stairs and reached the hall,—Adolphus the while racking his brain for some pretext to speak aside to Makepeace. As fortune would have it, Makepeace himself was at the instant crossing the hall, with a chamber-candle in his hand.

"With your permission, Bella," said Lord Osmond, "I will smoke a cigar in the garden. Here, Makepeace! give me a light."

The valet stopped short accordingly: Adolphus approached him; and while stooping towards the candle, he said in a low rapid whisper, "Hasten round and prevent young Ashton from entering by the gate this evening."

The cigar was lighted—Adolphus gave Isabella his arm again—and the party issued forth. The Earl was determined that Adolphus and Isabella should not wander away from himself and the Countess; and therefore, on entering the garden, he kept his son in continued conversation. But Lord Osmond had really no intention of straying: he had provided against the entrance of Christian Ashton—and that was the only thing he cared for. He fancied that there must be some suspicion in his father's mind: but what its precise nature was, he could not conjecture. As for the Earl, he was naturally led to imagine that this repetition of the evening walk might be in connexion with an expected visit from Christian; and that, after all, Adolphus *was* really favouring the discarded secretary's suit towards Miss Vincent. The Earl however chatted gaily, as if there were nothing to disturb his humour,—and all the more gaily, too, because he inwardly chuckled at the hope of wreaking a speedy vengeance on the presumptuous youth who dared aspire to the hand of his niece and stealthily intrude upon his grounds.

Meantime Makepeace, in pursuance of Lord Osmond's hint, had issued from the principal entrance of the grounds; and rapidly skirting the wall he reached the private door, against which he planted himself to await the coming of Christian Ashton. While standing there, he caught the sounds of heavy footsteps moving about just inside the garden door: then he heard a strange grating noise, as of some iron mechanism being acted upon; and this was followed by a sharp click—while a voice just audible to the valet's ears, muttered, "Botheration take this cursed thing! Ah, that's right at last!"

This latter ejaculation was accompanied by another grating metallic noise; and then the footsteps moved away from the neighbourhood of the door. The words were spoken in so low a tone—being merely in a musing strain to the man's own self—that Makepeace could not recognise who he was; and he was totally at a loss to comprehend what the proceeding meant. He had not however much time for reflection ere our young hero made his appearance; and on beholding Makepeace planted against the door, he instantaneously fancied there was something wrong.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Ashton," said the valet: "I am here to befriend you. You must not enter the garden this evening: Lord Osmond bade me come hither to warn you against it."

"For heaven's sake tell me," exclaimed Christian, "whether anything——" and then he abruptly stopped short, fearing lest the valet was acting as the Earl's spy.

"Do not be afraid of me, Mr. Ashton," continued Makepeace: "I am secretly disposed in your favour. The best proof is that it was I who procured the duplicate key for you, and left it with Lord Osmond's note at your lodgings yesterday. I can full well understand the reason you are not to enter the grounds this evening: it is simply because the Earl has taken it into his head to join the party in their walk."

"Thank you for this assurance!" replied Christian, his mind now infinitely relieved: for his first and very natural misgiving was that Isabella might have become involved in fresh trouble on his account.

He then bade Makepeace "good night," and returned to his lodging,—much disappointed however at not being enabled to meet Isabella. Makepeace hastily re-entered the grounds, and at once proceeded to the spot just inside the garden-gate where he had heard the footsteps, the muttered ejaculations, and the grating metallic sounds, which had so much perplexed him. At first, he could see nothing: but a closer scrutiny showed him a man-trap, with its teethed jaws wide apart, ready to receive and to close upon any unfortunate leg that might step between. Indeed the valet's own leg experienced but a narrow escape from being caught therein, as he was searching about upon the spot.

"This is extraordinary!" thought Makepeace to himself: but his knowledge of the Earl's character speedily made him aware that it was a device of that nobleman's fertile brain. "It is pretty clear that the old man suspects or knows something: but how the deuce could it have come to his knowledge? At all events *I* am not suspected: for his lordship was as kind to me to-day as ever—and I know the old bird too well to be deceived by such kindness if it were not perfectly natural. The cunning dog!—he thought he would keep this entirely to himself. He expects to catch young Ashton; and he will come here presently to see whether his victim is fast in the trap."

Makepeace was strolling away from the gate, when a mischievous idea struck him.

"Wouldn't he be astonished," thought the valet to himself, "if he came and found no trap at all? He would fancy that Christian had been caught, and had climbed over the wall, dragging the trap with him. Capital! I'll hide it!"

So Makepeace, carefully lifting the machine in such a way as to avoid getting his arms between its gaping jaws, carried the trap to some little distance, and deposited it amongst a group of shrubs,—having done which he re-entered the mansion.

In the meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles and his wife, Adolphus and Isabella, had been rambling

about the gardens: but the Earl took good care to keep them at a tolerable distance from the private door. Thus an hour passed; and then he proposed to return into the house. But on passing in-doors, the old nobleman made some excuse to leave them; and he hastened back into the garden.

"Ah, my young friend!" he said within himself, thus apostrophizing Christian Ashton, "I shall find you caught in the trap as sure as a gun! —but like a true lover of romance, you have too much pluck to roar out and thus betray everything. Or perhaps you have managed to extricate yourself,—in which case the teeth will show whether they bit home. But I am more inclined to think I shall find you pinned fast there,—enjoying a miserable martyrdom."

In his haste to ascertain the result of an idea which he conceived to be one of the most brilliant that had ever entered his fertile brain, the Earl of Lascelles did not pursue the tedious meanderings of the gravel-walk which led towards the private door: but he cut across the grass-plat—reached the evergreens—and began working his way manfully amongst them. But all of a sudden a terrific yell rang through the grounds; for, lo and behold! the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles was caught in his own trap.

Nothing could exceed the horrible cries and the piteous lamentations which kept coming from the lips of the wretched old man. Lord Adolphus and some of the men-servants rushed forth from the mansion: others followed with lights; and guided by the Earl's yells, they speedily reached the spot where he was pinned fast. Lord Adolphus was most painfully afflicted on beholding his father in a plight so unaccountable, but which for any one except a son would have had something so exceedingly ludicrous in it. Indeed, several of the servants turned aside to laugh outright; and Makepeace could scarcely keep his countenance. The old lord was extricated from the trap and borne into the house: but on arriving there, he would not suffer any one to attend him in his dressing-room except Makepeace. The Countess and Isabella, having retired to their own apartments to put off their shawls, had not heard the cries; and when they were informed of what had happened, they sped to the door of the Earl's suite of rooms to make inquiries and render any needful assistance. But Makepeace, opening the door a few inches, assured them that his lordship was by no means seriously hurt—that he desired to be left alone—and that they were on no account to send for medical assistance.

It was quite true that the old nobleman was not much injured—for the simple reason that the calf of his leg had been protected by a pretty considerable piece of padding, which was artistically fixed inside his stocking so as to give that appearance of modelled robustness which nature had denied to those spindle-shanks. And it was likewise on account of this succedaneous arrangement that the Earl would not suffer any one to enter his dressing-room except Makepeace.

CHAPTER LI.

A REVELATION.

THE incident of the man-trap remained enveloped in a considerable degree of mystery with the generality of the Earl's household. His lordship said, as if in a cursory manner, that he supposed one of the gardeners must have set it under the impression that there were nocturnal intruders upon the grounds; and he forbade any inquiries to be instituted. Makepeace of course took very good care not to confess how far he had been instrumental in producing the ignoble catastrophe: nor did he think fit to mention the circumstance even to Lord Osmond. The under-gardener likewise maintained the secret, in pursuance of the instructions he had received from the Earl: but the man could not for the life of him conceive how the trap had become moved from its original position.

When, at the expiration of a day or two, the nobleman was enabled to leave his room again, he took an opportunity of questioning the under-gardener: and though the fellow swore lustily he had planted the trap against the private door, the Earl could not help thinking the fellow had got drunk and had placed it amongst the shrubs. However, he was content to leave the matter as it stood: for he had no inclination to make a disturbance relative to an incident that was so painfully humiliating for himself. Yet bitter was his lordship's vexation that Christian Ashton should have escaped him: for it was his intention, if the youth had been caught in the trap, to summon the whole household to witness him in that position. The tables had however been turned: it was the Earl himself who was caught—the Earl himself likewise whom that household, with but three or four exceptions, had poured forth to see.

The incident produced the most painful impression upon the minds of the Countess, Adolphus, and Isabella. Without being at all enabled to account for it, they were nevertheless deeply saddened by the thought that the poor old nobleman had been placed in that cruel predicament. Such a state of feeling brings vividly up into people's minds the wrongs of which they have been guilty, or the duties which they have violated, in respect to the individual who is the object of their compassion. The Countess, who had many generous qualities notwithstanding the deep depravity into which an irresistible temptation had led her, was more than ever aroused to the blackness of her turpitude: while Lord Osmond, despite his unabating infatuation for his young and beautiful mother-in-law, could no longer look in his father's face without feeling that his guilt towards that parent was of the darkest and deepest dye. As for Isabella,—she, with her feelings far more keenly sensitive, and with her notions of propriety still more exquisitely delicate, was led painfully to reflect that as her uncle stood in the light of a parent, she had proved grievously disobedient to his wishes in stealthily meeting Christian Ashton.

The result of all these remorseful feelings was that the Countess of Lascelles penned a note to Adolphus, beseeching and imploring that on some pretext he would withdraw from the mansion, and that by means of a long separation they might

better endeavour to conquer their unhappy passion. She appeared to recover much if not all of that firmness of purpose which had at first stood her in such good stead, and enabled her to struggle for a time against the wiles of temptation. Adolphus—though feeling it was despair, if not death, to sever himself from the adored and worshipped Ethel—was nevertheless led by a sense of duty to make this atonement for his sin—however tardy, and however slight in comparison with the sin itself; and in a note penned in response to that of the Countess, he assured her that he would lose no time in stating to his father that he intended to travel upon the Continent.

As for Isabella,—she likewise penned a note; and it was to Christian Ashton. In terms of suitable maiden modesty—but still properly tender and affectionate after all that had passed between them—she besought him not to make any further attempts to see her until she could receive his visits with her uncle's full concurrence. She assured him that never would she prove faithless to the troth that she had pledged—and that if it were written in the book of destiny that they were not born for each other, yet that never would she bestow her hand where her heart was not likewise given. Thus the letter—though containing a *fiat* of complete severance for the present, and heaven alone could tell for how long a period—was nevertheless precisely such an one as became a young lady of the strictest purity of principle, and which a right-minded youth such as Christian Ashton could not possibly regard without feeling that it raised her more highly than ever in his estimation.

In pursuance of the solemn promise given to the Countess of Lascelles, and of that sense of duty to which he was awakened, Lord Osmond sought an opportunity of conversing alone with the Earl. This was a few days after the incidents related in the previous chapter; and the interview took place in the library.

"My dear father," began Adolphus, "I come to request your permission for my temporary absence from home."

"Well, it's a very proper in you to request my permission," responded the Earl: "there is nothing like obedience. I think I have often told you that I was a very obedient son. Indeed, it was one of my virtues. I recollect that I never ventured on the ice after my dear father, the late Earl, ordered me to keep off it——which, by the bye, was on the occasion when I fell through and was so nearly drowned that I was six hours in a state of suspended animation. But about this absence of your's—where are you going to?"

"I purpose, my dear father, to travel on the Continent for a year or two——"

"There is certainly nothing like travelling," remarked the Earl; "as indeed my book will show when it is published. I question however if you will pick up enough in Europe to fill two large volumes: for travels are nothing at all without lions, and bears, and crocodiles, and snakes. Why, would you believe it, the moment Mr. Bentley, the publisher——he is Publisher in Ordinary to her Majesty, you know, although I certainly never had the honour of meeting with any book bearing her Majesty's name on the title page——However, as I was about to state, the moment Mr. Bentley advertised '*a forthcoming work of travels by the Right Honourable the Earl of Lascelles*',—although, by the bye, there was not a line written at the time—I was waited upon by an old gentleman who offered me his literary assistance. I asked him for his qualifications; and I think he said he had written three voyages to the North Pole, eleven round the world, six travels in China, three into the heart of Africa, four to the Rocky Mountains, and about fifty others to different parts of the earth, including six or seven ascents up Mont Blanc, and about seventeen shipwrecks."

"But my dear father," exclaimed Adolphus, "this man was an impostor! A little calculation would show that a dozen lives would not suffice for so much travelling and voyaging."

"God bless your soul!" cried the Earl, "the worthy gentleman had never been out of England in his life: or else how could he possibly have found time to write the books at all? They were all composed at the British Museum, and published under an infinite variety of names and titles. Why, this good gentleman who came to me, as I am telling you, was a Colonial Bishop—an Officer in the East India Company's Service—a Subaltern Unattached—an Old Naval Officer—a Lady of Rank—an Oxonian—an Etonian—a Missionary to the South Sea Islands—a Trader to Hudson's Bay—and heaven only knows what! But you will fancy the answer I gave him. Of course I told him that the Earl of Lascelles did not want a hodge-podge dished up for him—but that they were my own personal experiences, adventures, and impressions that I was about to give to the world. I only mention all this to let you see that if you *do* travel, you could easily have a book confectioned for you on your return."

"But, my dear father, I do not want to write a book," replied Lord Osmond,—"much less to have one written for me."

"Well, well—every one to his taste!" said the Earl, complacently stroking his wrinkled chin, as much as to imply that it was *his* taste, and his pride too, to become an illustrious ornament of the literary world. "However," he continued, "I have not the slightest objection that you should take a tour on the Continent during your honeymoon."

"My honeymoon?" ejaculated Adolphus, in a sort of dismayed amazement—but rather at the unexpected mention of such words than because he was at a loss to comprehend them; for, on the contrary, he could not help at once suspecting at what the Earl was driving.

"To be sure—the honeymoon!" repeated his lordship, staring fixedly in the young nobleman's countenance. "And it is a very odd thing that at the moment you entered the library I was about to send for you. But there are strange coincidences at times. I remember once when I was at Eton, I was just going to take up a big stone to shy at a boy's head, when he picked up one and suddenly threw it at me with such force he nearly knocked my eye out. But as I was about to say, I was just on the point of sending for you, Adolphus, to have a very serious conversation with you. In a word, you must marry Isabella off-hand; and we'll fix this day week for the nuptials."

"But, my dear father," cried Lord Osmond, "this is impossible!"

"Impossible! What—to marry a pretty girl? Egad! I never found it impossible."

"But there is no love subsisting between us!" responded Lord Osmond.

"Love will come of its own accord. It's a deuce of a thing for springing up spontaneously."

"But I feel that I shall never entertain any other sentiment than that of friendship for my cousin. Besides," added Adolphus hesitatingly, "her own affections are already disposed of——"

"What! to that whipper-snapper who had the impertinence to bruise the nose of a Peer of England?" exclaimed the Earl, rubbing the proboscis thus alluded to, as if it still smarted with the pain: "the impertinent scoundrel on whose account I was caught——" the Earl was just on the point of adding "in a trap:" but quickly amending the idea, he said, "so nicely at the entry of that summer-house."

"It is perfectly true, my dear father," replied Adolphus, who was too much abstracted to notice the peculiarity with which the Earl's last words were uttered,—"it is perfectly true that Christian Ashton is the object of Isabella's affections; and really, with all due deference, you can only blame yourself for having introduced him to your table and thus thrown them so much together. There is no denying that he is a very prepossessing, intellectual, and agreeable young man; and it was not therefore astonishing——"

"Nevertheless," interrupted the Earl, somewhat severely—for he by no means liked to be reminded of the unexpected and unintended turn which his previous stratagem had taken when he introduced Christian into the bosom of his family,—"nevertheless you shall marry Isabella. I have made up my mind upon the point; and when once I am resolved upon a thing, it is as good as done."

"My dear father," answered Lord Osmond,

very seriously, "it is impossible I can take as a wife a young lady whose affections are engaged to another. It would be indelicate—cruel——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted the Earl, vehemently. "I tell you it is already as good as settled!"

"Not exactly so," rejoined Adolphus, with a firmness that was almost indignant: "for you have yet to obtain the consent of the two principal persons."

"Isabella will yield to my wishes," said the Earl: "indeed she *must*—she is dependent upon me——that is to say, she believes herself so——"

"And is she not?" inquired Adolphus, with astonishment.

"Never mind!" rejoined the Earl tartly. "I tell you she will assent—and I reckon upon your compliance likewise."

"Deceive yourself not for a moment, my dear father," said Adolphus: "I cannot—I will not marry my cousin Isabella!"

"And I say you *can* and you *shall!*" rejoined the Earl: and he spoke with a decisiveness that appeared to have something more in it than a mere whim or caprice.

"I see that this interview had better terminate at once," said Adolphus coldly: and he was rising from his seat, when he was struck by the imperious gesture with which the Earl bade him retain it.

"Now, understand me well, Adolphus," continued the old nobleman; "I have set my mind on this match for more reasons than one—and I intend it to take place. You had better yield with a good countenance—or you will compel me to make revelations which will perhaps somewhat startle you."

These ambiguous words instantaneously associated themselves in Lord Osmond's mind with those former ones in reference to Isabella which had struck him as peculiar; and knowing how for some years—ever since the death of her mother—the Earl had kept her in such privacy that neither he nor the Countess had the slightest idea where she was until she was suddenly brought home in the manner already described,—a painful suspicion in respect to his father's integrity arose in the young nobleman's mind.

"Is it possible," he asked, in a low and trembling voice, "that you have acted wrongfully towards that orphan daughter of your deceased sister?"

"What! do you think I have robbed her out of a fortune," ejaculated the Earl sneeringly, "when she never had a penny-piece of her own? Not I indeed! I never robbed anybody in my life—not so much as an umbrella from a friend: and umbrellas, you know, have ever been considered legitimate plunder."

"Then what revelations are these to which you so ambiguously refer?" inquired Adolphus, bewildered what to think.

"You had better not ask me," responded the Earl; "but like a good fellow, marry Isabella off hand. We'll have a sumptuous wedding; and I tell you what——yes I positively will!——I'll have it down at the Bloomfield estate—all the tenantry shall be invited—we'll have jumping in sacks, climbing up greasy poles, eating treacle-biscuits, and catching pigs with soapy tails. Unless indeed you prefer to have the wedding here——"

"My dear father," interrupted Adolphus, "once for all do let me beseech you to explain the grave and important reasons which you seem to have for wishing these nuptials to take place."

"Well, if you are obstinate," said the Earl, "the truth must be told:"—but he screwed up his face with the air of a man who had the prospect of no very agreeable task to perform.

"What on earth can it be?" demanded Adolphus, full of suspense: and yet this suspense was far from being so poignant as it would have been if he had a less frivolous and more stable-minded person to deal with.

"Look you, Adolphus!" resumed the Earl: "suppose that by any accident all my estates at my death should pass away to your cousin Isabella?"

"But, father, this is supposing an impossibility ——unless I myself were also dead; for of course I am aware that the entail descends upon the females as well as upon the males of the family."

"And why is it supposing an impossibility?" demanded the old Earl. "There is nothing impossible—as I fully proved when I rode the wild elephant in Africa."

Adolphus gave vent to an ejaculation of impatience.

"You wilful dog!" growled the old Earl; "you persevere in forcing me to tell you everything. Suppose, then—only suppose, I say—that some sudden exposure took place—and it became proved that you——But come! marry the girl and have done with it!"

"Father, you must speak out!" exclaimed Lord Osmond, now much excited, and with a suspense that was really poignant. "For heaven's sake tell me what you mean!"

"I mean, Adolphus," replied the Earl, himself considerably excited and painfully bewildered, "that though I have no doubt you are the son of your father and mother—nevertheless your father isn't your father and your mother wasn't your mother."

Adolphus gazed upon the Earl as if he thought he was going mad: and yet even from that strange conglomeration of absurd contradictions and ridiculous paradoxes, there seemed to be a certain idea to be eliminated—a startling deduction to be made. Adolphus was frightened: a cold shiver, like a presentiment of evil, ran through him: he essayed to speak—but vainly gasped for utterance.

"There is no harm in it if you marry the girl," continued the old nobleman; "and the world need never be the wiser—at least I hope not. For even if the truth did some day transpire, you could but lose the title—you would have all the estates by right of your wife, to whom they would devolve by entail."

Adolphus sate upon his chair as if he were in the midst of a dream. All the words which the Earl had just uttered appeared to confirm the wild —the startling—the almost impossible idea which his former incoherent speech had conjured up. The colour forsook the young man's countenance: he felt as if he were about to faint:—there was fortunately a decanter of water upon the table: he filled a glass and drank a long draught.

"You are saying all this to coerce me into a

marriage with my cousin!" he exclaimed, clutching with avidity at the thought.

"Isabella is no more your cousin, Adolphus," responded the old nobleman, "than I am your father——and I am *not!*" he added emphatically.

Adolphus raised his hands to his throbbing brows as if to steady his wildly agitated thoughts: his brain seemed to whirl in confusion. Could it possibly be true? Was he an unwilling impostor? had he lived thus long an animated lie without knowing it? had he for twenty-four years passed in the world as a breathing falsehood, though utterly guiltless of wanton deceit? Oh, if it were so, he felt as if he could not survive it—'twere a blow too terrible to bear!

The old Earl had no such depth of feeling; and though he was to a certain degree excited and distressed, yet it was only to a degree, and not nearly to the same extent as the unhappy—the miserable—the soul-crushed Adolphus. Yet all in a moment there sprang up in the young man's heart a sense of consolation—yes, *consolation* in the midst of such overwhelming revelations as these. If he were not the Earl's son, his crime in respect to her whom he had hitherto looked upon as his mother-in-law became in a moment many, many shades lighter to contemplate, dark though its hue still remained.

"Tell me how all this happened!—explain it!" he said, with quick and excited utterance: "for heaven's sake keep me not another moment in suspense!"

"Listen then," said the Earl, speaking with less silliness and flippancy than was his wont. "It was at Bloomfield that I was residing with my first wife when a son and heir was born twenty-four years and a half ago. A few days after that birth, important business hurried me away to the Continent; and the serious embarrassments in which a near relation, who is long since dead, had involved himself at Vienna, detained me there for a period of four months. When I returned to England my wife was in a northern county, on a visit to some relations there: and indeed, as letters had previously informed me, I was assured that it was for the sake of her health that she had removed thither. I rejoined her: the child whom she represented to me as my son, was healthy and thriving. Years passed on—and you know with what kindness you were treated by her who passed as your mother, and indeed from whose bosom you were nourished in your infancy. You are aware likewise that she was of the Catholic persuasion and that she was attended by a priest in her last hours, when a mortal illness overtook her beneath this roof. To that priest she confessed everything: but he dared not give her absolution unless she revealed to me the fraud which had been perpetrated."

"Go on," groaned Adolphus in a half-stifling voice.

"The revelation was made accordingly," continued the Earl: "but I swore to the Countess—your mother of adoption—that I would continue to treat you as my son and never expose the fraud to the world. She died with a conscience much relieved——she died blessing me," added the old nobleman, now displaying deeper feeling than Adolphus had ever before seen him exhibit.

"And why that fraud?" asked the young man, still profoundly agitated.

"I have already told you that I was abruptly called away from England when my child was three days old. A month afterwards that child died. There were circumstances attending its birth—circumstances so painful to its mother, as to preclude the idea that she could ever again hope to become a parent. She dreaded lest the severance of the tie which that child's existence constituted betwixt herself and me should alienate my heart from her, and make me look upon her even with aversion as a wife who could give no heir to the haughty name of Lascelles. She knew moreover that if anything happened to me, the estates would devolve upon my sister—Isabella's mother,—and that she herself (my wife, I mean) would have to retire upon a small jointure, almost excluded as it were from that family of which it was her pride to be one of the heads. All these reasons induced her to practise the cheat which I have described. Opportunities were favourable: I was absent, with a certainty of remaining away for yet some months—she had a surgeon and a nurse accessible to bribery—female dependants who were devoted to her—and I had left her with the illimitable command of funds. You understand the rest—I need say no more."

"Yes, there is something more for you to tell me!" answered Adolphus: then, after a pause, he said—and the words appeared to half choke him,—"Whose son am I?"

"A poor family's who resided in some midland county which my wife traversed on her way to her friends in the north. This family, being heavily bribed, departed at once for America,—such immediate removal to a foreign clime being the paramount condition of the compact. They have never since been heard of: but still, as I just now said, there is always the possibility, if not the probability of some of them turning up——"

"And the name of this family?" said Adolph quickly.

"I do not know it," replied the Earl can give the most satisfactory reason in —which is, that I never knew it. E late Countess intended to mention it, sl —which is just the same thing as if she meant to tell me at all."

The old nobleman, having spoken in a se and deliberate manner me time, was relapsing into his v lity,—which on served to aggravate t f feelings experienced by the wretch The latter began to pace the library anner; and vainly did he essay ghts sufficiently for calm delib blow which had struck him had been revealed slowly the effect was nevertheless him with a most cruel ab already said, the only glim trated into the darkn the fact that his amou wear an incestuous hand, in what a posi ment an accident m foreseen circumstance prove to the whole wo rightful heir to th

celles, he was in reality an interloper in the family.

"Now I suppose, Adolphus," said the Earl, accosting him, "you will consent to marry your cousin Isabel—and I will ring the bell at once to let her know she is to send for the milliner and order the wedding-dress."

"No, no—for heaven's sake act not thus precipitately!" exclaimed Adolphus. "At least give me four-and-twenty hours to reflect!"

"Four-and-twenty hours to reflect!" ejaculated the old nobleman. "Why, I never reflected for four-and-twenty hours running in all my life!"

"It is impossible to come to an immediate decision!" rejoined Adolphus impatiently. "My feelings are so disturbed—my mind is so cruelly agitated——I beseech you, press me not now—but at this hour to-morrow——"

"Well, well—I see that I must humour you," said the old nobleman: "and it is natural enough you should be annoyed and excited to learn that you are not your father's son! But mind! to-morrow we shall set to work in good earnest to hurry on this bridal."

Adolphus made no response—but hastened from the room. He retired to his own chamber, and there gave way to his reflections. An hour did he thus remain in the companionship of those thoughts; and at the expiration of that interval, his mind appeared to be made up to some particular course. Descending to the drawing-room, he found the Countess and Isabella seated together; and the former was at once struck by the strangeness of his looks. He inquired where the Earl was—and learnt that he had gone out in the carriage for an hour or two. Adolphus then made a sign for the Countess to escape from Isabella's society, or get rid of her for a little while, on some pretext; and Ethel was therefore still further convinced that there was something exceedingly wrong. It was by no means difficult for Lady Celles to quit the apartment without exciting suspicion on the part of the unsophisticated Isabella. Adolphus speedily followed her.

They were now alone together in another sitting-room. Ethel immediately said, "For heaven's sake, Adolphus, relieve me from suspense! What has happened?—has the Earl discovered everything? my deep, deep guilt known to him?"

"No, no, Ethel," was the young man's response: "you are not so deeply guilty as you have hitherto believed. A strange and terrible revelation has been made to me——In a word, I am your brother!"

It would be impossible to describe the astonishment of Ethel on receiving this announcement. The first thought that struck her was that the excitement subsided, was that her mind had become unsettled. When Adolphus gradually detailed to her all that had occurred between himself and the Earl of Lascelles—when she found that it was indeed the truth that he was her brother, and that he spoke seriously—Ethel then recollected that her father had been an exceeding uxorious husband—that he had been blind to her face between the two sisters—especially too when under the influence of wine—had sometimes spoken of some strange declaration his wife of his had practised towards him: but from motives of delicacy Ethel had never pressed any inquiry on the point—and the Earl himself had never gone beyond the vague hints just alluded to. Now, however everything was explained; and in those very hints themselves the Countess beheld a confirmation of the startling and wondrous tale which Adolphus had just related. She sate gazing upon him with illimitable love and compassion in her looks: the better feelings which had prompted her to write him the note so strenuously urging separation, were all absorbed in the profound pity she experienced for him;—and the excitement of so much sympathy could not do otherwise than resuscitate all the ardour of her passion. Perhaps, too, the knowledge that this passion had suddenly ceased to wear the doubly dark aspect it had previously borne to her contemplation, was another strong reason wherefore her deep and devoted love should thus revive. Yes—she sate gazing upon him with looks of fondness and sympathy: but she spoke not—she knew not what words to say.

"Ethel," at length said Adolphus, breaking this long silence, "after everything that has taken place between us, I could not settle my mind to any specific course without first consulting you."

"I know not how to advise you, Adolphus," answered the Countess. "I am as much bewildered as, heaven knows, you yourself must be!"

"To-morrow at mid-day," said the young man, with a species of desperation in his looks, "I must notify my decision to the Earl."

"And that decision," said Ethel in a low soft voice, but with the glitter of anxiety in her eyes, —"what will it be?"

"I see that you yourself feel," responded Adolphus, "that I have but one course to adopt—that there is no alternative but to yield to the Earl's wishes."

A low shriek—or rather half-stifled scream burst from the lips of Ethel at these words evidently so altogether unexpected by her; and Adolphus, with a sudden start, contemplated her in mingled surprise and terror.

"No—never, never, Adolphus!" she exclaimed, springing up from her chair, her cheeks flushing and her eyes flashing with an almost frenzied excitement. "What! *you* marry Isabella? No, no!—I could not live to behold you another's!—— But perhaps you have never loved me?"—and as the thought smote her with a sudden anguish, she sank down again upon the chair weeping bitterly.

"Ethel, dearest Ethel!" exclaimed the young man, throwing himself at her feet, seizing both her hands, and pressing them in fervour to his lips; "you know that I love you——dearly—devotedly—madly love you! Wherefore, then, this cruel suspicion? Ah, think you that if I loved you not as much as my lips proclaim, I should have been enabled to stifle all good feelings in my heart at the time when I believed it was my own father's wife——"

"Enough, enough!" cried Ethel hysterically: and then with a sudden solemnity of look and manner, she added in a low tone, "At all events we are rescued from that deep sense of stupendous guilt!"

"Tell me what you would have me do, dearest Ethel," said Adolphus; "and your slightest word

shall become the strongest law for me. But remember, dear Ethel, my position is not merely a painful one—it is absolutely frightful!"

"I know—I know it!" exclaimed the Countess, again speaking with a kind of hysterical frenzy; "and therefore it is impossible for me to advise you. Do what you will: but if your position be frightful, mine is almost desperate—and sooner than behold you compelled to lead another to the altar——"

She stopped short; and Adolphus was terrified by the strange wild look of mingled frenzy and despair which for a few moments seemed stamped upon her countenance.

"Good heavens! what am I to do?" he exclaimed, starting up from his kneeling position at her feet, and beginning to pace the room with agitated and uneven steps. "I feel as if I were going mad!"

"And I," cried the Countess in a thrilling voice, "feel as if I were mad already! Oh, why did I ever love you as I have done?—wherefore do I love you so passionately still?"

"Ethel, let us endeavour to be composed and reasonable," said Adolphus, at length resuming his seat by her side, and taking her hand as he looked with fond earnestness and imploring entreaty in her face. "I tell you that I neither *will* nor *can* take any step without your consent:—but will you calmly envisage all the difficulties of the position in which I know we are placed?"

"Yes, yes—proceed!" said the Countess. "I am calm—I am reasonable!"—and yet she shivered visibly as if with a cold inward desperation.

"Would you, Ethel, that we should fly away together?" asked Adolphus. "No—I am sure you would not: for it would be ruin for us both. The Earl in his rage would proclaim everything in respect to myself: I should become an outcast—penniless; and though God knows I shrink not from the idea of poverty on my own account, yet for your sake, Ethel—Oh, I could not endure to behold you, my beloved one, pining away in want!"

"Think not of me," answered the Countess; "for I could dare everything. But not for worlds would I have your true position proclaimed!—not for worlds would I have you stripped of your rank—scorned and spurned by those who have hitherto been your equals——No, no—I could not—it would kill me!"

"You see, Ethel," continued Adolphus, "that what I said is right—and we cannot flee away together. But on the other hand I cannot remain here in the same position as before: the Earl insists that I should marry Isabella. Neither can I carry out our original view and go abroad upon the Continent: because there again arises the consideration that the Earl insists that I shall espouse Isabella!"

"In a word, then," rejoined the Countess, speaking in a voice of cold and unnatural calmness, "your position is reduced to these alternatives—that you must either fly away with me, or remain to espouse Isabella. We have both agreed that the first of these alternatives is impossible; and I see therefore that you are endeavouring to make up your mind to the latter. Is it not so?"

"In the name of heaven, Ethel, what else can I do?" asked Adolphus, with passionate vehemence.

"And Isabella, who loves Christian Ashton?" said the Countess, still in the same voice as before.

"Did you ever for a moment fancy that this childish passion of theirs," exclaimed Adolphus, "would eventually come to anything? It was all very well that you and I availed ourselves of it for our own purposes: but could we in sober seriousness conceive that an Earl's niece would be allowed to throw herself away upon this penniless youth?"

"And you could level your mind to the acceptance of a bride whose love you know to be bestowed upon another—and which very love you yourself have helped to fan?"

"Ethel, you are cruel—too cruel! you are goading me to desperation!"—and again Adolphus started up from his seat in a wild and excited manner. "Will you tell me," he demanded, after two or three rapid pacings to and fro,—"will you tell me, Ethel, what course I am to pursue?—for as there is a heaven above me, I see but one!"

"Pursue it then," said the Countess: "pursue it, Adolphus——and may you be happy. But I—but I——"

"Oh! now you fill me with wretchedness again!—and the young man literally wrung his hands in anguish.

"No, no—be not unhappy," responded the Countess: and there was still an unnatural coldness in her look. "It is useless, Adolphus, to continue this scene: it is most painful for us both."

"Then, by heaven," ejaculated the young man vehemently, "I will *not* marry Isabella! I will take some step—indeed I will do the very worst rather than seal the unhappiness of your life!"

"And I, Adolphus, would do the very worst also," rejoined the Countess, "rather than live to behold you the husband of another!"

Having thus spoken, Ethel abruptly quitted the room: and Adolphus continued to walk to and fro—but no longer in an agitated manner: he walked with slow pace, sombre countenance, and downcast looks.

CHAPTER LII.

THE DEED OF A NIGHT.

ADOLPHUS and Ethel did not meet again [illegible] evening; and this was at the dinner-table the Earl and Isabella were present. But [illegible] almost seem as if they had by tacit consent imposed their looks in such a manner [illegible] to each other should there linger the [illegible] to remind them of the painful [illegible] occurred a few hours back. [illegible] of course, suspected nothing [illegible] Adolphus had acquainted [illegible] ing revelation in regard [illegible] naturally Ethel's [illegible] husband from [illegible] had been made [illegible] derstand why [illegible] and smile as gaily [illegible] look as if she were [illegible] the same way in [illegible]

Adolphus to maintain his usual demeanour, so that the Earl might believe him anxious to avoid the risk of showing the ladies by his looks that anything extraordinary had taken place. As for Isabella,—she was inwardly sad at having been compelled by a sense of duty to pen that note to Christian Ashton to which we have already alluded; and not being versed in the arts of dissimulation, she could not outwardly conceal this mournful pensiveness.

The dinner passed away; and when the ladies retired to the drawing-room, the Earl accompanied them,—not from any particular motive, but merely because on this occasion he had no inclination to sit over his wine. Adolphus went out to take a short ramble by himself: for he again felt the necessity of giving way to his reflections. Thus the evening passed without Adolphus and Ethel being left alone together even for a single instant.

We must observe, for the better comprehension of what is to follow, that the Countess of Lascelles still slept apart from her husband; and though the Earl was becoming impatient of this separation of chambers, he had not as yet insisted that should cease.

Night came: silence prevailed throughout the latial mansion of the Earl of Lascelles. Were sleeping there? Who can say? When the ld retire to rest in the evening, they know not it may transpire during the many hours of kness ere they awaken to the light again. And ing those hours what deeds of mystery and or are often perpetrated! Wherefore to the d-minded is night more or less terrible, even gh their own consciences be without reproach? s because they know that crime chooses the r of darkness wherein to achieve its purpose: y know that guilt shrouds itself beneath that ibre veil when creeping stealthily along its h of iniquity. They know that if their intelere can divest night of its superstitious terrors, hat nevertheless real objects of horror are lking abroad, and that the votaries of crime onsute frightful shapes. They know that murder,ud burglary, and violence of every descriptiome fearfully personified during the hours of darss; and that the breeze which sighs or that thend which howls around their dwellings, may be ing the last low moan or else the loud cry of murdered victim's agony. Yes—night has itsors: it is peopled with fearful shapes;—me dark passions of man accomplish all

night passed—and morning dawned upon l mansion of the Earl of Lascelles. It ul day to which that night had thus he beams of the orient sun shone verdure of the gardens, and as if gems were appended ds were carolling in the w on the domestics' he breeze of morn, rose from their r the work of later, as eight f other cham- —that of Adolound-floor. The oftly breathing

zephyr, which carried the blithe song of birds upon its wing, and penetrating to every ear, might have infused serene happiness into every heart.

But, ah! what horrible rumour is this which towards nine o'clock begins to circulate like wildfire throughout the palatial mansion?—has murder been doing its dread work during the darkness of the past night? or is it some frightful error? No: it is all but too true; and the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles has been made the victim of a foul and mysterious assassination.

It appeared, from the statement of Makepeace, that he went as usual to his master's suite of rooms a little before nine o'clock; and that on entering the bed-chamber, he was horrified on beholding the sheet deluged with blood. He approached—and found the Earl lying on his back, with his throat literally cut from ear to ear. Seized with a mortal terror, he rushed forth on the landing, and raised that cry of murder, which awaking such terrible echoes, speedily reverberated throughout the mansion. Then the other servants began flocking thither, with ghastly horror depicted on their countenances: Adolphus, the Countess, and Isabella, from their own respective chambers, sped with wild distracted looks in the same direction;—and that morning of such serene blissfulness out of doors, was one fraught with dread confusion, trouble, mystery, and affright within those walls.

Who could have done the deed? Where was the weapon with which it was accomplished? This was not to be found. The nearest surgeon of the neighbourhood, who was quickly sent for, and who was speedily on the spot, declared that the Earl must have been dead some hours—and that it was consequently in the depth of the night when the red right arm of Murder bared itself for this tremendous deed. Furthermore, the medical authority affirmed that the fatal wound was inflicted by some very sharp instrument; but that from certain appearances, he was convinced it was not with a razor,—his opinion being that it was a large knife. Whatever the instrument were, death must have been instantaneous: the unfortunate old nobleman must have died almost without a groan. But that instrument, as we have already said, was not to be found; and when the police arrived upon the spot, nothing was discovered to attach suspicion to any particular individual. Every room throughout the mansion was strictly searched,—Adolphus, the Countess, and Isabella desiring that theirs might form no exception, as they did not choose to draw a line of demarcation between themselves and the domestics under such circumstances. But in none of the many apartments of that house was there discovered the slightest scintillation of a clue to the assassin. Yet the conviction was strong that the perpetrator of the deed must be an inmate of the mansion. No burglarious entry had been effected: no door had been forced—no window had been found open, when the servants first descended from their own chambers. If therefore the assassin was not a dweller within those walls, could he have been secreted for hours beneath the Earl's bed awaiting his opportunity to commit the dreadful crime? But in that case, how did he escape after the deed was done? Certainly

not during the night: for, as already stated, no door nor window was found open in the morning; and such assassin could not have slipped forth from the premises after the servants had risen without being perceived by those who were moving about within the walls, or by the gardeners in the grounds. No—it appeared incontestable that the murderer was an inmate of the mansion: but on whom could suspicion alight? There seemed to be no reason to imagine that any one had a motive for such a crime: or at least such was the opinion formed by the police after carefully and minutely inquiring into the case.

But if the author of the deed were thus involved in an obscurity which seemed impenetrable, not less mysterious was the motive itself. Could it have been plunder? There was no evidence in the Earl's suite of apartments that a single thing of any value had been removed. His purse, containing some thirty or forty pounds in notes and gold, was on the toilet-table,—as were his superb watch and massive chain, his diamond rings, and several other articles of jewellery. A box containing other jewels stood on a chest of drawers; and though unlocked, it had not been rifled. Plunder therefore was assuredly not the assassin's object. Then, what could have been his motive? Private vengeance? No: this idea seemed altogether incompatible with the harmless, frivolous, inoffensive character of the murdered nobleman. The mystery was great: it seemed as if it would remain impenetrable. In ninety-nine cases out of every hundred where a foul crime has been committed, suspicion at once attaches itself to some individual; the circumstances of the deed present a clue—or there is a known motive which might have influenced the suspected person. But in the present case there was nothing of all this—no clue left behind by any want of caution on the assassin's part—no visible object which any one had to gain by such a deed—no known motive that might have served as an impulse to any particular individual.

After the discovery of the terrific crime, the Countess of Lascelles was borne in a swoon back to her own chamber, whence she had hurried to the tragic scene, as above described. Isabella, on learning that it was all too true, likewise fell into unconsciousness, and was conveyed to her apartment,—a serious indisposition supervening. Adolphus appeared most profoundly horrified and shocked; and for some hours he was quite incapable of issuing any instructions. Makepeace bewailed the loss of the master who had always been so kind and indulgent to him; and all the other servants of that extensive establishment seemed to be stricken with consternation and grief. Indeed these feelings appeared to be universal within those walls;—and yet many doubtless said to themselves, "There must be *one* accomplished dissembler amongst us—*one* being whose hypocrisy is as perfect as his crime is tremendous!"

It was therefore a fearful thing for those who were innocent, to be compelled thus to [illegible] within themselves. As one looked upon [illegible] he said to himself, "At this moment I [illegible] gazing on the assassin:"—and that other [illegible] equal probability saying the same thing [illegible] own heart as he looked in the face [illegible] Such a state of things aggravated [illegible]

dismay, and the consternation which prevailed throughout the house: yet no one offered to leave it; for such a proceeding, by itself alone, might have at once drawn down suspicion on the head of such person.

There was a Coroner's inquest: but nothing transpired to throw the faintest light on this appalling mystery. The proceedings terminated without affixing the remotest suspicion upon any individual. Not a garment had been found bearing a blood-stain in any room, save that where the tragedy itself occurred: no knife, nor weapon of any other description, had been specially pointed at as the one which had been used by the murderer's hand. The tragedy created an immense sensation out of doors: the mystery in which it was enveloped, struck with awe the myriad readers of newspapers. Everything appeared to be out of the ordinary course in reference to this foul crime; for not even did the whisper of scandal suggest a single name as that of the probable author of the deed. Conjecture itself was stupified—surmise was prostrate. It appeared to be one of those deeds which, terrible in their mystery and inscrutable in their motive, now and then occur upon the theatre of the world as if to prove that things may take place on earth defying the power of man to fathom, and which are to remain entombed in darkness until the finger of heaven for its own wise purposes shall draw aside the veil and bring all to light.

Throughout the day when the murder was discovered and the two following ones, the Countess of Lascelles kept her chamber,—a physician being in almost constant attendance upon her, as she was in a state of fever, and frequently hysterical. The Earl of Lascelles,—as we must now denominate Adolphus, for he refused not to adopt the rank to which the world believed him entitled, [illegible] which there seemed nobody to dispute,—kept [illegible] own room for the greater portion of the first [illegible] on the second he attended at the inquest [illegible] afterwards he assumed the position of [illegible] establishment. But he appeared deeply [illegible] the terrific tragedy which had taken place; [illegible] countenance bore every indication of profound [illegible] sorrow—his step was languid and slow—his [illegible] was mournful and subdued: he appeared as [illegible] were merely exerting a little energy for [illegible] sake, but that it cost him the most painful [illegible] to do so. As for poor Isabella,—she continued [illegible] seriously indisposed; and we may as well here [illegible] mark at once that it was not until after the funeral [illegible] of her deceased uncle that she crossed the threshold [illegible] of her own apartment.

But it was before that funeral took place—and [illegible] on the fourth day following the night of the mysterious murder—that Adolphus and Ethel met for the first time since the moment when, on the morning of the foul deed's discovery, they had rushed from their respective chambers to the scene of the crime to ascertain whether the frightful intelligence which had reached them was indeed [illegible] it was in the drawing-room that they [illegible] day, as above stated; and [illegible] her, Ethel had so far

sable garments which she wore, together with the snowy white cap of widowhood, made her look more ghost-like still. We have already said that Adolphus was changed likewise; and his mourning garb threw out in ghastlier relief the pallor of his own countenance.

Ethel was in that drawing-room first; and she was half reclining on the sofa when Adolphus—now Earl of Lascelles—slowly opened the door and made his appearance. Strange indeed was the look which these two beings threw upon each other; and these looks were precisely similar in their expression. It was with mingled horror, aversion, and reproach that Ethel looked upon Adolphus: it was with mingled horror, aversion, and reproach that Adolphus looked upon Ethel. But the next instant the aspect of each countenance changed: Ethel looked with surprise upon Adolphus, as if she had expected another species of gaze on his part—and Adolphus looked with surprise on Ethel, as if her own gaze had equally astonished him.

He walked slowly up to her; and fixing his eyes upon her, said in a low deep voice, "Ethel, you have sold your soul to Satan on my account!"

"What, Adolphus!" she exclaimed: "is it possible that you dare hurl the terrific weight of your own crime upon me?"

"Ethel," quickly rejoined Adolphus, "this is outrageous—this is horrible!"

"Adolphus," retorted the Countess, "this is playing the part of unheard-of villany, to impute your crime to me!"

"Good God!" murmured the Earl of Lascelles, staggering back as he pressed his hand to his brow; "do I hear aright? or am I dreaming?"

"Adolphus," said Ethel, "of what use is this shocking hypocrisy on your part? Methought when you first entered the room that your looks [illegible] in my presence——"

"this is intolerable!" interrupted Adolphus, grasping Ethel's arm. "It was I that you would not dare look me in

and me, murderer!" cried the Countess, as if with a strong shudder from his touch. derer!" literally growled Adolphus with ferocity. "Beautiful as you once were, you loathsome to my eyes!"

nster!" retorted Ethel, with keenest bit: "you are horrible as a fiend in my

re was nearly a minute's silence,—during those two beings gazed upon each other, the strongest feelings of horror, aversion, and thing expressed in their countenances. Their yes appeared to burn: yet they did not shoot forth fitful glances—it was with a steady fire shining from the eyes of one towards the eyes of the other, transfusing mutual abhorrence! Yet neither seemed to dare avert those eyes from the other, lest it should be thought there was quailing and cowardice: for whatever the t[illegible] it be, very certain it was that Adolph[illegible] the crime upon Ethel, resolute in affixing

"And you, Ethel," retorted the Earl of Lascelles, "exhibit such a spectacle of brazen female hardihood that fills me with even more astonishment than your capability of committing the crime itself—for your conscience all the while is whispering that you *are* a murderess!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Ethel, quivering visibly from head to foot, "that there should be such a power of hypocrisy in man. What earthly purpose does it serve you to deny your crime in my presence, when you know that, considering all the past, I dare not betray you?"

"Come, Ethel," responded Adolphus, "at least let this scene of hideous mockery terminate. Confess your guilt: for you likewise know that I dare not betray you!"

"Wretch! coward—thus to treat a woman!" cried Ethel.

"Ah! but if that woman, being a murderess," retorted Adolphus, "brings it all upon herself!"

"You are driving me to madness!" exclaimed the Countess, stamping her foot upon the floor. "Does not all evidence brand you with the guilt of this stupendous crime? Were not your parting words to me, on the day preceding the night of that crime, that sooner than marry Isabella you would *do the very worst?*"

"Ah! but you, Ethel, echoed those words!" retorted Adolphus; "and you declared that sooner than see me lead Isabella to the altar, you would *do the very worst!* Methought at the time you alluded to suicide——"

"And I did!" ejaculated Ethel, vehemently. "But I, on my part, thought at the time that you meant to dare my husband's anger and vengeance even to the uttermost——"

"And I did mean all that!" exclaimed Adolphus. "I meant that sooner than wed Isabella after all you had said, I would flee away to the Continent and let the Earl expose—repudiate—discard me if he thought fit. Yes—that was my meaning! But your's, Ethel, was very, very different!"

"No, Adolphus—as God is my judge," cried the Countess, passionately, "I swear——"

"For heaven's sake add not perjury and blasphemy," interrupted Adolphus, with an air of horror and affright, "to the other stupendous crime! For it is I who swear—I who take God to witness——"

"No, no!" almost shrieked forth Ethel: "become not a perjurer! become not a blasphemer!"

It was now the Earl of Lascelles who stamped his foot with rage; and he began pacing the room like a lion chafing in his den: while Ethel took shorter but not less agitated walks to and fro on the hearth-rug.

"Adolphus," she at length said, abruptly stopping him, and looking fixedly upon his countenance, "you seem to have forgotten that you told me the tale of that interview with the Earl, when he revealed to you that you were not his son. Oh, [illegible]us obstinate! Remain silent, if you will: [illegible]—do not persevere in a course as dread[illegible]dastard!——do not, by attributing the [illegible]ne, for an instant entertain the hope [illegible]ake me think it was not *your* hand [illegible]trated it! Had you not every not trembling at the idea of

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losing rank—position—fortune? Did you not therefore say to yourself that you would for ever silence the lips that alone could tell the tale: for you knew that mine were already sealed by that guilty love which had subsisted between us!"

"If I have listened to you in silence," responded Adolphus, "it is not that my blood has ceased to boil with indignant impatience. Ethel, Ethel, it is you who thus with a detestable dissimulation persevere in attributing the crime to me!—it is you, I say, who hope to make me fancy that you really did not perpetrate that crime! You speak of motives:—*you* had every motive! Think you that I comprehend not the terrific jealousy which swayed your heart when I spoke of wedding Isabella? Ah, confess that it was through love of me you did this deed!—confess it, Ethel, and I will pardon you——but for heaven's sake persevere not in ascribing it unto me!"

"I also, Adolphus, have curbed my impatience," answered the Countess, "that I might give you a fair chance for retractation, confession, and atonement:—but you are obstinate! Now listen. We will not blind our eyes to the fact that the crime rests between us two: for no other living being had a motive in perpetrating it. It was therefore I or you who committed it——and you know, Adolphus, that it was yourself!"

"Ah, Ethel! you have indeed said truly," he exclaimed, "that it lies between us two: but you will not look me much longer in the face and with such astounding dissimulation deny that all the guilt was wholly and solely yours!"

The Countess literally ground her teeth with rage; and then she muttered in a voice that was hoarse with the same feeling, "Miscreant, you know that you are a murderer!"

"No, fiend in female shape! it is you who are a murderess!"—and having thus spoken, the Earl of Lascelles walked abruptly forth from the room.

The Countess flung herself upon the sofa, and gave way to bitterest weeping and most convulsing sobs.

CHAPTER LIII.

CHRISTINA AND THE AYAH.

THREE weeks had elapsed since the visit which Madame Angelique paid to the Princess Indora; and the oriental lady had not as yet carried her project into execution with regard to Oaklands. The Duke of Marchmont had been suddenly called out of town on some particular business; and thus Madame Angelique had found no opportunity of communicating with him. She had written a note to this effect to the Princess Indora, at the same time that she sent home the European costumes which her Highness had ordered.

Three weeks, too, had elapsed since that visit which Christina paid to Zoe, and when she had every reason to believe that this amiable lady suspected the passion which her husband cherished for our heroine. Christina had been very unhappy since that date: but she had endeavoured to conceal her feelings as much as possible from the Princess,—though the latter on three or four occasions kindly questioned her whether she had not something which troubled her mind? Christina gave evasive responses; and these tended to confirm Indora's suspicion that her young friend was not altogether happy.

Accordingly, one day when they were seated together in the elegantly furnished drawing-room, the Princess said in a gentle voice, and with a look of the most benevolent sympathy, "I am afraid, my dear Christina, that you have something which is preying upon your mind? If it be so, tell me—hesitate not to make a confidante of me. I am your friend—I love you—and I wish you well."

"I am deeply grateful to your ladyship," answered Christina, "for the many, many kindnesses which I experience at your hands: I have every reason to be happy beneath your roof——"

"Perhaps you miss the society in which you were wont to mingle when at Lady Octavian Meredith's? Here it must be dull for you——"

"Oh, no—far from it!" exclaimed Christina, hoping to divert the conversation into some other channel. "I love the life which I am leading here——"

"I know that you always speak with sincerity," observed the Princess; "and therefore my mind is at ease on that point. Indeed," she added, with a smile, "your time is well occupied—for you make occupation for yourself. It is exceedingly kind of you to take so much pains in teaching Sagoonah to read English accurately:—but are you sure that she does not take advantage of your kindness?"

"Oh, no, my lady!" exclaimed the amiable Christina. "Sagoonah is so willing a pupil, that I experience the utmost delight in instructing her. I had not been many days in your ladyship's house, before I saw that Sagoonah was most anxious to make herself thoroughly acquainted with the English language. She had already a very tolerable idea of my native tongue: but she wished to be able to read it—and your ladyship would be surprised, if you now heard her, at the progress she has made."

"I have no doubt of it," observed Indora; "for she is a young woman of remarkable intelligence."

At this moment the object of the conversation entered the room to make some announcement to her mistress; and those three females constituted a group which the eye of even an anchorite could not have surveyed with indifference. The Princess Indora, in her superbly picturesque garb, and with her magnificent charms, half-reclining upon the velvet cushions of the sofa—the ayah, with her darker style of loveliness, standing before her in that attitude of respectful attention which she was wont to adopt—and the youthful Christina, invested with that exquisite virginal beauty which rendered her a being so well calculated to excite the tenderest interest,—these three, we repeat, being thus grouped, would have formed an admirable subject for the pencil of the artist.

An hour after that conversation between the Princess and Christina, we shall find the latter seated in another room, in company with Sagoonah, who was engaged in the practice of her English reading. Here was another interesting spectacle,—that Hindoo woman, evidently exerting all her powers to render herself proficient in the task

which that beautecus English maiden was so willingly superintending! And when Christina bestowed well-deserved praises upon her pupil, the superb dark eyes of the latter lighted up to an almost preternatural lustre, flashing with joy and triumph at the progress which she thus made.

A few hours later the night has come; and Christina is alone in her own chamber at the Princess's villa. It was half-past ten o'clock; and the maiden had not long retired thither. She sate down at the toilet-table, while combing out the masses of her raven hair: but gradually she fell into a profound reverie—her hands sank upon her knees—the comb dropped without her perceiving it—and her hair remained floating all dishevelled upon her shoulders and down her back, lower than her waist. There were several topics which thus engaged Christina's profound meditation. She thought of Zoe—the amiable, the interesting, the kind-hearted lady, who she feared had been making the most dreadful sacrifice of her own feelings rather than suffer her husband to perceive that she had fathomed the secret of the love which he entertained for another. Then Christina thought of this love which Lord Octavian cherished towards herself: she strove to conjure up a feeling which might satisfy her that she was annoyed and indignant at being the object of this love: but she could not thus far do violence to the tender sentiment which existed with a certain degree of reciprocity in her own heart. Then she thought of her brother who a little while previously had lost his situation with the Earl of Lascelles, and had not as yet obtained another; and then her reflections turned, with mingled awe and horror, upon the mysterious death of that unfortunate nobleman.

Christina's reverie thus lasted for a long time; and when she gradually aroused herself from it, and consulted her watch—which was a gift from the Princess Indora—she perceived that it was past eleven o'clock. She was hastening to continue her night-toilet; and in another quarter of an hour was ready to retire to rest. But just as she was about to extinguish her candle, she thought she heard the sounds of footsteps descending the stairs from the floor above that on which her own chamber was situated. They were steps so light and airy that only the keenest sense of hearing could have caught them; and Christina felt convinced that the tread was the stealthy one of a person not wishing to be overheard. A vague terror seized upon her: for she all in a moment remembered that warning letter which Mr. Redliffe had sent to the Princess, and which her Highness had shown her about three weeks back. That letter, as the reader will remember, was to the effect that some evil-disposed persons might probably seek to inveigle Indora or the ayah Sagoonah into a snare; and as the pure-minded Christina was too unsophisticated and inexperienced to be enabled to fathom the real significancy of Mr. Redcliffe's allusion, her imagination naturally excited this vague terror which now seized upon her. She drew close towards the door—and listened with suspended breath. Again she caught the sounds of footsteps: they were now descending the lower flight—and in a few moments they ceased. She endeavoured to calm herself with the idea that it might be Sagoonah, or one of the other female-servants, descending for some purpose: but if so, wherefore that evidently studied stealthiness of tread?—as it was not so very late that the fear of awakening the household need be entertained. Perhaps Christina was rendered somewhat nervous and apprehensive by having reflected on the mysterious murder of the Earl of Lascelles; and this impression being strong on her mind—together with the recollection, so vividly conjured up, of Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter—naturally filled her with vague misgivings and with a dread of some unknown danger.

She opened the door gently—and again listened. All was now still. She thought of retiring to rest: but scarcely had she closed the door again, when that mysterious terror came back with renewed force; and she felt that she could not possibly sleep, nor even lie tranquilly in her couch, unless she were reassured in respect to the safety of the premises. She remained at the door to listen if the footsteps would return: but a quarter of an hour passed—and all continued quiet. She thought of going to the Princess's chamber and telling her what she had heard: but then she reflected that if her apprehensions should prove groundless, she would feel humiliated and look foolish at having given way to such terror. But she thought she might at all events ascend to the female-servants' chambers to see if they were there: for the conviction was strong in her mind that she had heard footsteps descending, and that they had not ascended again. Enveloping herself in a muslin wrapper, and taking the candle in her hand, she proceeded up-stairs with a tread as light as if she were a spirit gliding. On reaching the landing above, she saw that Sagoonah's chamber-door stood open; and on entering, she found that Sagoonah herself was not there. They were therefore the ayah's footsteps that she had heard: but why was she thus long absent? The thought now struck Christina that Sagoonah must be ill; and she went down stairs—still with the same noiseless tread as before, in order not to disturb the Princess. A light was issuing from the boudoir, the door of which stood open. Christina advanced—and looking in, beheld Sagoonah bending over one of the huge volumes of the *Times* newspaper, which were kept in that room. The Hindoo woman had her back towards the door: the volume was spread open upon the table; and she was evidently so absorbed in its contents that she did not catch the rustling of Christina's dress.

The first thought which struck our artless young heroine, was that the ayah experienced such an ardent longing to render herself proficient in the English tongue, that she was even inclined to sacrifice a portion of her night's rest to the prosecution of her studies: but all of a sudden she was startled by the vehement manner in which Sagoonah gave utterance to something in her own native tongue, and which was therefore incomprehensible to the maiden. At the same time Sagoonah stood up from her previously leaning posture; and glancing around, so strange a light flashed from her eyes on beholding Christina, that the latter was absolutely terrified. There was an expression of rage too on the ayah's countenance, where the rich red blood

mantled through the duskiness of her complexion: but instantaneously composing herself, she placed her finger to her lips of vivid vermilion, to enjoin silence. Then beckoning Christina to enter the boudoir, she gently closed the door.

"What made you seek me, Miss Ashton?" asked the ayah, in a voice which though perfectly respectful, nevertheless displayed a firm resolution to have her query satisfied: then, suddenly recollecting something, she hastened to close the volume, as if to prevent Christina from seeing what particular part of the huge file she had been reading.

"I heard footsteps descending the stairs," answered Christina: "they did not re-ascend—I was alarmed—I went up to your room—not finding you there, I thought you were ill—and with this apprehension I came to see if I could be of any service to you."

While the maiden was thus speaking, Sagoonah's luminous dark eyes were riveted upon her, as if to read into the very depths of her soul, and thus glean whether she were truly explaining her motives. But it was impossible to doubt Christina's sincerity: her looks were artlessness itself;—and Sagoonah was satisfied.

"You must do me a favour, Miss Ashton," she said; "and that is, *not* to mention to the Princess that you found me reading one of these great books. Her Highness would be very angry with me; and I am sure you would not wish to draw down her displeasure upon my head."

"I certainly should be sorry to do anything of the kind," answered the maiden: "but I think you must be in error to suppose that your good-hearted mistress would be offended——"

"She would!" Sagoonah emphatically responded, as she thus interrupted our heroine.

"Then if you are conscious of an indiscretion," said Christina, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "wherefore did you commit it?"

"Do not ask me, Miss Ashton!" rejoined the Hindoo woman: and again there was a sinister flashing in her burning, haunting eyes. "Promise me the favour which I have requested—and you know not with what deep gratitude I shall regard you!"

"Rest assured, Sagoonah," replied our heroine, "I shall not travel out of my way to do you an injury. But my pledge is given with the understanding that you do not repeat that which, according to your own words, you know to be an indiscretion."

"I will not repeat it," answered Sagoonah; "and I thank you, Miss Ashton, for your kindness."

They then issued together from the boudoir; and cautiously ascending the stairs, separated to their respective chambers. But Christina could not help thinking it strange that the Princess Indora was likely to be offended if it came to her knowledge that her Hindoo attendant made use of her progress in her English studies to peep into those files of the *Times*.

On the following morning Christina received a note from Zoe, requesting her if possible to call upon her in the course of that day. It was most affectionately worded—but made not the slightest allusion to Lord Octavian. It informed Christina that the health of the writer continued to be very bad, and that the physician had ordered her to go abroad for change of air.

"If Zoe be really acquainted with her husband's unfortunate love for me," said our heroine to herself, "I can scarcely think that she would invite me to the house, unless perfectly confident that Lord Octavian will not be present. Therefore I will go!"

In order to do Christina full justice, we must observe that if she had for a moment fancied she would meet Lord Octavian at the house in the Regent's Park, she would not have gone: she would have even preferred the alternative of appearing ungrateful and unkind to Zoe. She showed the letter to the Princess,—who at once gave her assent, and placed the carriage at Christina's disposal. On reaching her destination, she found Zoe alone in the drawing-room; and the amiable girl was shocked by her friend's appearance. Pale, ill, and languid as she was on the former occasion,—she looked infinitely more sickly now. She was reclining upon a sofa; and it was with a visible effort she raised herself up to a sitting posture to greet our heroine.

"My dear Zoe, you are indeed very ill!" said Christina, the tears starting from her eyes as she embraced her friend.

"Yes: I suffer much——from indisposition," responded Zoe, in the mild voice of completest resignation; "and as I told you in my letter, I am going abroad. Those whose assent it was necessary to obtain, have given it; and I shall depart with as little delay as possible."

Zoe evidently alluded to her father and her husband: but Christina was struck by the manner in which she thus spoke of them,—as if she studiously yet delicately avoided the mention of Lord Octavian's name.

"I think I shall go to the South of France or to Italy," continued Zoe; "and perhaps a more genial climate may restore me——or perhaps," she added, with a mild sadness, "I may find a tomb beneath the sunny sky of the South!"

"Good heaven, Zoe! talk not thus despondingly!" exclaimed Christina, the tears now gushing forth from her eyes. "You will recover—rest assured that you will recover! It is all the effect of that accident——But now you are weeping!"

"And are not *you* weeping, my sweet friend?" asked Zoe, smiling with a soft sadness through her tears. "Come—let us endeavour to cheer each other. I do not think that I shall see you again before I leave England; and it was to bid you farewell that I asked you to visit me to-day. I am rejoiced you have come——I have a little token of my regard for you——Remain here while I go and fetch it."

With these words, Lady Octavian Meredith rose from the sofa, and slowly quitted the room,—her every movement indicating langour and lassitude of the frame. Christina was deeply affected by Zoe's appearance; and she had indeed a misgiving lest her health had received a shock which it would never recover. She had remained barely a couple of minutes alone, when the door opened—and Lord Octavian Meredith made his appearance. There was hurry, and trouble, and wildness in his whole manner; and hastily accosting our heroine, he abruptly exclaimed, "Christina, I am half mad! That angel-wife of mine has no doubt penetrated

the secret of the love with which you have inspired me—that love which is consuming me——"

At first Christina was filled with confusion and trepidation at the sudden appearance of Octavian: the next moment she was terrified by his manner: but now she said in an agitated voice, "My lord, I beseech you not to address me in these terms! It is an insult to that wife of yours who is indeed the angel you declare her to be!"

"But you *must* hear me, Christina!" replied Octavian, who was labouring under the most powerful excitement. "To whom else can I address myself on such a subject, if not to you,—*you* whom she loves—*you* who are her friend——"

"My lord, for the very reason that your amiable wife regards me as a friend——"

"Christina, it is useless for you to treat me thus! Good heavens, your coldness kills me! Those who love, can recognise love in others—and I know that I am not altogether indifferent to you!"

"My lord, I can hear no more!" exclaimed our heroine, with burning blushes upon her cheeks: and she moved towards the door.

"Recollect!" he said, hastening to intercept her passage: "if you leave the room thus abruptly, Zoe will inquire the reason—and you will have to inform her that I have insulted you—that I have outraged your delicacy,—and what a dagger will this be to drive deep down into her heart!"

"Good heavens, in what a position are you placing me!" murmured Christina, so painfully affected—so bewildered, perplexed, and even anguished, that she knew not what to do.

"Christina, I tell you that I am half mad!" hastily rejoined Lord Octavian Meredith. "That angel in human shape is making every sacrifice of feeling for my sake! She knows that I love another—but she does all she can to prevent me from suspecting that she has that knowledge which is preying upon her very vitals! And now she is going abroad—and she will not allow me to accompany her!"

"My lord," interrupted Christina vehemently, and even with passion,—"it would be infamous—it would be abominable on your part, to allow your wife to go alone in search of that health which you yourself have destroyed—and which, alas! alas! she may perhaps never regain!"

"I take God to witness," cried Meredith, still labouring under the strongest excitement, "that I have implored and entreated—I have prayed and besought Zoe to permit me to go with her: but she will not. Mild, submissive, and meek in all other respects as she is, she shows herself firm and decided upon this one point. But, Oh! the pretexts and excuses which in her magnanimity of soul she invents! She declares that to drag me after her, weak and languid as she is—to have the continued consciousness that I am enchained to an invalid wife—would only render her Continental travel a punishment to herself, rather than a means of working a benefit. No: she will not allow me!—and she has even succeeded in persuading her father that to regain her health she must go alone!"

"My lord," cried Christina, again speaking vehemently and passionately; "if you do not accompany her ladyship, you will be guilty of a cruelty so abhorrent——"

"That it will even make *you* hate me?" he said, in a voice which was hoarse with the excitement of his harrowed feelings. "By heaven, it will only require that to impel me to suicide at once!"

"My lord!" half-shrieked Christina.

"Oh, yes! I tell you that I am well nigh mad," ejaculated the young nobleman: and he passionately tossed the rich clusters of his hair away from his throbbing brows. "You know not how much I have suffered since you were here last—three mortal weeks of one long agony! Heaven can attest that I have striven—Oh! I have striven to do my duty towards Zoe, and to banish *you* from my memory——"

"My lord," cried Christina, "your language as a married man is an offence and an insult to my ears. You know that I dare not leave the room for fear that your angel-wife should suspect how you are treating me: and therefore your conduct is cruel—most ungenerous! It amounts to a persecution: and I entreat——no, I *command* you to be silent!"

"Oh! give me your hatred, Christina, if you will," exclaimed the young nobleman, who did indeed appear as if he were going mad, "rather than your cold indifference! Am I to blame because I have no control over my own feelings? No, no—it were monstrous to judge me thus harshly! Christina," he continued, in a milder manner, "I tell you again and again that I have striven to do my duty towards Zoe: I have forced myself to dwell upon all her goodness—her amiability—and what is more, upon the sublime generosity of her disposition; I have endeavoured to catch the transfusion of that love which she cherishes for me——but in all these have I failed! Now, am I to be blamed for this? No, no—I am to be pitied!—and you see before you the most miserable wretch upon the face of the earth!"

It were impossible to describe the feelings which agitated the young maiden as she listened to Octavian's speech. It affected her almost to tears: and yet her virgin modesty was offended that he should suffer her, however distantly, to understand that it was his love for *her* which prevented him from performing his duty to his wife. She could not help pitying him from the very bottom of her soul,—at the same time that she felt she ought not to listen to the language he was uttering. She would have flown from the room—but the strong reason already specified compelled her to remain there. Never was her situation so painful!—and she could have thrown herself upon the seat to give vent to her feelings in tears, only that she dreaded lest Zoe should suddenly make her appearance. Ah! but a thought struck her.

"My lord," she hastily said, "Zoe was to be absent but for a minute—and twenty have elapsed since she left the room! She may be ill—and I go to succour her."

"Stay!" cried Octavian: "stay!" and he seized her hand.

"Not another second! Unhand me, my lord!" cried Christina proudly.

The next instant the door closed behind the agitated girl: but scarcely had she thus passed out upon the landing, when she caught the sounds of rapid footsteps ascending the flight leading to the upper storey,—footsteps so light that they

were only just audible. A sickening sensation seized upon Christina. What if Zoe had been listening? Rapid as the lightning easts its blaze upon the entire canopy of heaven, did the damsel review her own conduct during the wildly agitating scene with Octavian Meredith; and she saw that she had not given utterance to a single word that she could now wish unspoken. On the contrary, every syllable that had issued from her own lips was precisely such as she would have uttered if able at the time deliberately to ponder what she was about to say. With this consciousness of perfect rectitude of behaviour, her presence of mind was completely regained—her strength of purpose was recovered; and she ascended to Zoe's chamber.

She found Lady Octavian Meredith seated in an easy chair, with a languid and enfeebled appearance—but otherwise with an air of serene composure.

"It must have been a servant whose footsteps I heard," was the thought which rapidly traversed Christina's brain: "for if Zoe had been listening, she could not possibly thus dissemble!"

"Pardon me, my dearest friend," said Lady Octavian, in that sweetly soft plaintive voice which for some time past had been habitual to her: "pardon me for having thus long left you to yourself—but I was seized with such a sense of exhaustion that I was compelled to sit down and rest. Here, Christina! accept this trifle from one who loves you:"—and she presented our heroine with a locket of choicest workmanship, and containing some of her own hair.

Christina pressed it to her lips; and then obeying some strong impulse, she sank upon her knees—took Zoe's hand—and covered it with her kisses and her tears. She sobbed audibly—but spoke not—and yet there was a world of eloquence in the whole proceeding on her part: for not more plainly could the meaning of her almost involuntary conduct have been expressed if she had exclaimed, "Pardon me, dearest Zoe! I know that I am the cause—though heaven can attest how innocently—of all you suffer!"

Yet those words were *not* spoken; and whether Zoe comprehended the silent eloquence of the weeping and kneeling maiden's proceeding, must be left for the reader to conjecture. Certain it is that Lady Octavian wound her arms around Christina's neck—strained her to her bosom—sobbed and wept likewise: and thus were their farewells expressed!

When Christina again found herself in the carriage, as it bore her homeward, she could scarcely recollect how she had reached it after that parting scene with the amiable lady whom she feared that she should never behold again. Profound was the affliction which Christina experienced; and on regaining the villa, she hastened up to her own chamber, where she once more gave way to the wild outpouring of her anguish.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE EXPLANATION OF A PLOT.

It was evening; and Madame Angelique was seated in her elegantly furnished room,—the table well spread with dessert and wine. It was evident she expected somebody: for she frequently consulted her watch,—murmuring to herself, "This note specified nine punctually, and it is considerably past."

At length the door opened, and a domestic announced the Duke of Marchmont.

"I know it is shameful to keep a lady waiting," said his Grace, with a sort of forced good-humoured jocularity; "but I was detained at the Club where I dined."

"Better late than never, my lord," responded Madame Angelique; "and now if your Grace would honour me by taking a glass of wine, I will explain how I have progressed in a certain matter in which your Grace is interested.

"Is it that of the Indian lady?" inquired the Duke, as he helped himself to some wine. "By heaven! I hope your answer will be in the affirmative—though I care not even if it should be to tell me that the hope points towards that ayah of her's: for the magnificent beauty of the one is equalled by the darker glory of the other's."

"Ah! then you have seen them, my lord?" ejaculated Madame Angelique, with a smile of satisfaction.

"You had so piqued my curiosity a few weeks ago, when you renewed the subject one night that I was here——"

"That your Grace went and laid wait at Bayswater to catch a glimpse of them in their carriage?—eh, my lord?" said the milliner with an arch smile.

"Precisely so," responded Marchmont: "and I was so interested that I went a second time. On the first occasion I beheld the lady and her ayah; and, good heavens! what wondrous beauty on the part of each! The second time I saw the lady with a young English girl, whom to my astonishment I at once recognised. She is Miss Ashton—the sister of that very identical young dog who spoilt my game in respect to Stanhope and my wife. She was at first with the Mereditbs—and to tell you the truth, I had marked her out as my prey."

"And why, my lord, should you not honour her with your favour in her turn?" inquired Madame Angelique. "I have never seen her—at least not to my knowledge: but if she be worth any trouble——"

"Worth any trouble?" exclaimed Marchmont: "she is worth as much trouble as either the eastern lady or the ayah! She is of a ravishing beauty; and those three together must form a group such as you, Madame Angelique, never had in the saloon adjoining—beautiful as I admit your houris are. But come—tell me what is this satisfactory intelligence which you have to impart?"

"The eastern lady, my lord, will be in your power," replied the infamous woman, "whenever you think fit to say the word. I took the business in hand myself—and fortune favoured me. I

found the ayah accessible to bribery on the very first occasion when I dropped her a hint that a great nobleman had fallen in love with both herself and her mistress: but she is a strange creature in her way—for she at once declared that her mistress should have the honour of your Grace's preference, and that she herself would be content to assist in the enterprise."

"Is her mistress at all gay?" inquired Marchmont: "has she been brought over to this country by some wealthy nabob, who by dying or on leaving her, has enriched her?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lord!" cried Madame Angelique: "she is a paragon of virtue and propriety. This much the ayah assured me,—giving me to understand that the astutest artifice and the most unscrupulous force must be employed for the vanquishing of that stubborn virtue of hers."

"Then methinks it is a somewhat difficult task?" said the Duke, helping himself to another glass of wine.

"By no means, my lord!" rejoined Madame Angelique. "The train for the artifice is laid: it will be for you to use the violence. I have managed admirably—and success is certain."

"But what in the name of heaven," cried the Duke, "is the lady doing in this country? Surely you must have learnt some particulars——"

"The ayah is a woman of few words—speaks only to the point—and is by no means disposed to waste her breath in unnecessary communications. I could obtain nothing more from her," continued Madame Angelique, "than what was absolutely necessary for the carrying out of our aims. Listen, my lord. I ere now informed your Grace that fortune favoured me—and it was so. Assisted by the ayah, I obtained admission to the lady; and the conversation took such a turn—no matter how—that I came away with the thorough understanding that she is to visit Oaklands for a few days——"

"What! have you made her believe she is to be the guest of the Duchess and myself?" exclaimed Marchmont, evidently at a loss to comprehend the milliner's proceeding.

"Quite the contrary, my lord! The lady supposes that you and the Duchess will not be there at all—but that out of kindness she is to be permitted to make your country-seat her home for a few days; and in her ingenuousness," added Madame Angelique, with a mocking air, "she has been led to fancy that it is quite customary in this country for a nobleman thus to place his mansion at the disposal of a foreigner of distinction, no matter whether male or female."

"Well, but what plan do you suggest?" asked the Duke: "for I cannot for the life of me——"

"Listen, my lord! The lady will go alone to Oaklands: of *that* I am confident;—and what is more, she has provided herself with a quantity of European dresses so that she may not have an extraordinary appearance. Of course her Grace the Duchess will remain ignorant that the lady is at Oaklands: but what is to prevent your lordship from finding your way there late some evening, and entering stealthily? You find the bird in your own cage—and what is more, she has flown voluntarily thither. She *must* succumb; and then it will be for your Grace to convince her of the impossibility of her invoking the law to punish you. For how will the matter stand? Here is a lady, who has lived long enough in England and speaks the language well enough to comprehend all its customs, proceeding of her own accord to your country-seat—leaving her servants behind her—discarding for the time being her own habitual costume—having English dresses made expressly for the purpose,—why, who on earth would believe her tale if she were to proclaim that she had been inveigled into a snare? Shall not I be ready to stand forward to give my own version of the manner in which the arrangement was effected between herself and me?—shall I not at once boldly affirm that I was a messenger of love from your Grace to her—and that she accepted the overture and went to the appointment? Make her understand all this, my lord—and rest assured that she will rather seek to veil her shame as closely as possible, than to expose it uselessly."

"Yes—the plot is admirable!" exclaimed the Duke; "and you are the most accomplished of useful women. But when is the affair to come off?"

"I will write to the lady to-morrow," responded Madame Angelique; "and I have no doubt that on the day after she will repair to Oaklands. It is for your Grace to despatch a messenger with suitable instructions, so that she may be received by the servants in the light of an honoured guest at whose disposal the entire establishment is to be placed so long as it may suit her to sojourn there."

"I will send off the necessary instructions the very first thing in the morning," responded the Duke. "And now, to discourse upon another subject—what about Lettice Rodney?"

"Ah, the ungrateful wretch!" cried Madame Angelique, with an indignation that could not possibly have been greater if it were based on the most honest grounds: "to serve me in such a way after all I had done for her!"

"Well, but what has become of her?" inquired the Duke.

"That is exactly what I should like to ascertain—but she has been spirited away, no one knows where. They say she is penitent. Penitence indeed!"—and with as much disgust as if it were a heinous crime the bare idea of which thus excited her, Madame Angelique screwed up her countenance into a strange contortion.

"Well, relieve your feelings with a glass of wine," said the Duke.

Madame Angelique followed his Grace's counsel; and went on to exclaim, "Who would have believed it? Most people, when their girls get into trouble, leave them to get out again as best they may. But here was I—with a sense of humanity which no doubt was carried to an extreme,—here was I, my lord, rushing off to Liverpool to see the wretch, and to offer to find her lawyers, and counsel, and all that sort of thing—on condition that she kept my name out of the question: but the prison-door was banged in my face—and I was told that Lettice Rodney did not want to see me. Not want to see me!—*me*, her very best friend!——and now I hate her so that I could scratch her eyes out if she came across me!"

"But have you no idea," inquired Marchmont, "who was at the bottom of all those proceedings on her behalf? The newspapers spoke of influential friends——"

"Yes—and they specially mentioned the name of the Stanleys," responded Madame Angelique. "Ah, I recollect!—I saw something hinted about another person being behind the scenes: but I can't fancy who it could be."

"I don't know why," said Marchmont, "but it has occurred to me that the same individual who extorted the confession from Lettice of all that business down at Oaklands in the winter—whose voice she thought familiar, if you recollect, but whose face she could not catch a glimpse of—may have been her secret friend throughout this last affair?"

"But now that it is all over," cried Madame Angelique, "it is scarcely worth while to bewilder oneself with conjecture. Fortunately my name did not transpire at the trial——"

"No—it *was* fortunate," observed the Duke. "By the bye, have you ever heard anything about Eveleen O'Brien?"

"Ah! there's another ungrateful wretch," exclaimed Madame Angelique, again getting excited over her wrongs. "She too has turned penitent! and I'm sure that if penitence becomes an epidemic, like the cholera or anything of that sort, I shall have to shut up shop. No—not while I have such patrons as your Grace!" cried the infamous woman, thinking it necessary to pay the Duke this compliment.

Marchmont rose to take his departure,—previous to doing which, however, he placed a roll of bank-notes in Madame Angelique's hand, as an earnest of his liberality in respect to her precious machinations with regard to the Princess Indora.

Early on the following morning the Duke sent off a message to Oaklands with a letter containing suitable instructions to Purvis, the steward, with regard to the reception that was to be given to the oriental lady; and so little care had he for the feelings of the Duchess, that he did not even think it worth while to add a hint to the effect that the circumstance of this visit to be paid to Oaklands by the lady in question was to be for ever withheld from her Grace's knowledge. At the same time that the messenger set off for Oaklands, the infamous Madame Angelique forwarded a letter to the post, addressed to the Lady Indora, acquainting her that their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont had the pleasure of placing their country-seat in Hampshire at her ladyship's disposal for so long a time as it might be agreeable to her to sojourn on that domain. Madame Angelique was careful to assure Indora in this letter that the Duke and Duchess were occupying their town-mansion, and had no thought of going into the country for the present,—that therefore the Lady Indora would be perfect mistress of Oaklands—and she (Madame Angelique) wished her ladyship all possible health to enjoy her rambles about the beautiful scenery of the domain.

We ought perhaps to observe that Sagoonah had remained altogether in ignorance of that warning letter which Mr. Redcliffe had sent to the Princess: for Indora had not chosen to terrify her ayah by making her aware that she was the object of any evil design. She had therefore contented herself at the time with issuing precautionary instructions of a general character,—the faithful Mark, the major-domo, being the only one of the servants to whom she confided the nature of that letter. Thus it happened that the name of Mr. Redcliffe was never mentioned by Sagoonah to Madame Angelique.

The Princess Indora duly received Madame Angelique's note; and without communicating its contents to a soul, commenced her preparations for departure. She informed Christina that particular business would take her away for a few days,—during which interval she hoped the young maiden would not feel dull nor lonely; and she gave her permission to invite her brother Christian to pass those few days with her at the villa if she thought fit. Her Highness ordered a post-chaise to be in attendance for the ensuing day; and as she perceived that the faithful Mark—the comptroller of her little household—wore a somewhat anxious countenance as these preparations were going on, she summoned him into her presence,—availing herself of an opportunity when she was alone.

"I am well aware, Mark," she said, "that you entertain a deep interest in my behalf; and you are probably afraid that I am about to fall into some snare which is being set for me. But you need have no such apprehension. The business which takes me hence for a few days, is connected with a matter vitally concerning my own interests. I see my way clearly: but I have thought it necessary to tell you this much, in order to relieve your mind from any misgiving."

"I am truly rejoiced to hear your ladyship speak thus confidently," answered the steward; "and my mind is indeed more at ease."

He then bowed and withdrew,—the Princess not volunteering another syllable of explanation; and Mark had no undue curiosity: it was sufficient for him that Indora seemed to know perfectly well what she was about.

On the following morning the Princess apparelled herself, with Christina's assistance, in one of the European costumes which Madame Angelique had sent home. This was the first time that the King of Inderabad's daughter found herself thus dressed; and it would have been difficult for even the most scrupulous critic in respect to female loveliness, to decide whether she looked handsomer in the picturesque garb which she was wont to wear, or in this apparel made after the most recent Parisian fashion. The superb figure of Indora, with all its richness of contour and the admirable modelling of its limbs, gave its own shape as it were to whatsoever costume she chose to adopt; and hers was a beauty so far transcending all the advantages which feminine charms are wont to derive from the toilet, that it indeed mattered but little what fashion or style she followed. The corsage of an English dress could not set off the grandeur of the bust more completely than the oriental caftan—nor the Parisian bonnet impart additional splendour to the dark glory of her hair.

In her new costume—unattended and alone—the Princess Indora entered the post-chaise; and on leaving the villa, all the instructions she gave to the postilions were that she was going into Hampshire. Thus no one at that villa, except Sagoonah herself, was aware of the Princess's destination; and the Princess suspected not that her ayah knew it.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that the post-chaise entered upon the broad domain of Oaklands; and it presently dashed up to the front of the mansion. Purvis and the other domestics, in obedience to the instructions received from the Duke of Marchmont, were in readiness to afford the Princess a suitable welcome; and as she alighted from the post-chaise, they were astonished at her extraordinary beauty. They had been told that an oriental lady of rank, but preserving a strict *incognito*, would arrive at Oaklands; and they had pictured to themselves a dark-skinned female, apparelled in some extraordinary fashion. But when they beheld Indora, whose complexion was only of the most delicate duskiness, not exceeding that of a brunette, and with a fine-grained skin of transparent clearness—apparelled too in a plain but tasteful travelling-costume, such as an English lady might wear—they were all taken by surprise. Yet in this amazement—an amazement which was produced far more by her extraordinary beauty than by any other circumstances,—the respectfulness of their demeanour was not an instant lost; and she was at once conduc the old steward to the State Drawi There she was waited upon by fema household, who escorted her to th prepared for her reception; and no travelling costume to apparel h more elegant garb. On drawing-room, she intima ducted over the mansion ingly promptly in atte the various sumpt and in due course There Indora contemplating mont's ance

she conversed with the old steward in the most affable manner.

"I have been made acquainted," she said, still lingering in the gallery, "with that terrible tragedy which is so fearfully connected with the name of Oaklands. Were you here when it occurred?"

Purvis responded in the affirmative; and Indora proceeded to question the old man on various points connected with that deplorable history. Purvis—who was delighted with the frank amiability of the Princess, and also astonished at the fluency with which she spoke in his native tongue, as well as at the superior intelligence which many of her observations indicated—cheerfully satisfied her curiosity; and the tale of the Duchess Eliza and Bertram Vivian was told all over again. Indora listened with a deep and awe-felt interest; and in the course of some remarks which Purvis made at the conclusion, he said, "The very dagger, my lady, with which the dreadful deed was accomplished, exists still beneath this roof!"

"Is it not strange," said Indora, with a visible shudder, "that the present Duke of Marchmont should have preserved a weapon which every time he beholds it, must so frightfully remind him of the foul deed of assassination whereby he lost his uncle?"

"To tell your ladyship the truth," answered Purvis, "his Grace knows not that the weapon is still retained within these walls. It is I who have kept it: and if you were to ask me wherefore, I could not say. Heaven knows that it is through no morbid feeling of curiosity: for seldom indeed do I venture to cast a look upon that terrible weapon. But after the coroner's inquest, I found it lying in the room where that inquiry took place: no orders were issued as to its disposal; and I thrust it away in a lumber-closet. There it remained forgotten for a year or two—until the closet itself was to be pulled down in the course of certain alterations which were made within these walls. Then the dagger again fell into my hand: it was covered with rust—and a cold feeling of horror shot through me at the thought that it was my deceased master's blood which was encrusted there. Your ladyship may think it a strange fancy on my part—but I took that weapon, and with my own hand scoured the blade so that the blood-rust should disappear; and this being done, I thought of burying it in the ground, in order to put it for ever out of human sight. But another strange whim seized upon me; and I thought I would preserve it as a relic of the past,—just as in former times the armour of those who perished in [illegible] was preserved by the families to which they [illegible]. To be brief, the fatal weapon has been [illegible]rved; and there are times when I think [illegible]taining possession of it I have been [illegible]e higher impulse which I cannot [illegible]."

[illegible]ost singular!" said Indora, [illegible] it was not, as you have [illegible]norbid curiosity:"—then [illegible]se, during which she [illegible] "The horrible has [illegible] as well as the [illegible]e human heart [illegible]f them. Yes [illegible] already told [illegible] tragedy, that it came from North America, and is of peculiar workmanship."

"It was brought from North America, together with other curiosities," responded Purvis, "by Bertram Vivian. If your ladyship will come this way, I will show it to you."

The old steward conducted the Princess Indora to a superbly-furnished saloon, where marble pillars and splendid draperies gave a grandeur to the scene,—and where, too, there were some beautiful specimens of sculpture. At the extremity of this saloon there was a small cabinet, containing a variety of curiosities—amongst which were those that Bertram Vivian had brought over with him from the United States. The old steward touched a secret spring in a rosewood cupboard of curious workmanship: a door flew open, revealing a single drawer; and thence he took forth the fatal dagger of which so much had just been said. With a visible tremor shooting through her entire form, the Princess Indora took it in her hand, and examined it attentively for upwards of a minute,—at the expiration of which she returned it to Purvis, who consigned it back again to the place whence he had taken it. Shutting the drawer, he closed the little door of the closet; and Indora said, "In the country to which I belong, we have articles of furniture with secret springs: but I do not understand the working of this one."

The old steward at once gave her the explanation she seemed to desire; and they then issued forth from the cabinet. It was now announced to her that dinner was served up; and she was conducted to the dining-room, where an elegant repast appeared upon the table. The liveried lacqueys were in attendance just as if it were the Duchess herself who was thus being waited upon; and indeed all possible respect was shown towards the Princess.

The repast being over—and there being still two more hours of daylight—Indora resumed her wanderings through the mansion, but on this occasion dispensing with the attendance of Purvis. She revisited the picture-gallery; and thence proceeded to the chamber where, as she had been told, the Duchess Eliza took leave of her weeping servants when about to go forth alone from that mansion where so much misery had overtaken her. In this chamber the Princess sate down and gave way to a train of mournfullest reflections,—tears even trickling down her cheeks. Then she repaired to the room which was occupied by Bertram Vivian when he was staying at Oaklands; and there again did the Princess linger in profound and painful meditation. Wherefore was she thus deeply interested in every circumstance and every scene at all associated with that tragedy of nearly nineteen years back?

From that apartment the Princess Indora roamed to the magnificent saloon where the marble columns and the rich draperies imparted an air of truly ducal grandeur, and where there were such exquisite specimens of the sculptor's art to be contemplated. But all these Indora appeared not now to notice: she seemed bent upon some purpose which absorbed every other thought and feeling. A strange light was burning in the luminous depths of her magnificent dark eyes: her lips were compressed with the decisiveness of that profound purpose of her soul; and her feet bore her straight

towards the cabinet whither Purvis had previously conducted her. And now she looked around as if to assure herself that no one was by to observe her movements or watch her proceedings; and satisfied on this point, she entered the cabinet. Unhesitatingly was her taper finger pressed upon the secret spring—the little door flew open—and the next moment the dagger was in her hand. Wherefore did the Indian Princess thus again grasp that weapon with which so frightful a deed was associated? what strange feeling thus impelled her to gaze once more on the dagger that had drunk so deep of human blood?

But now a strange scene ensued. Closing the little door with its secret spring, and still retaining possession of the dagger, Indora came forth from the cabinet. Intently were her luminous dark eyes fixed upon the blade which the whimsical or else more deeply mysterious care of Purvis had kept brightly polished; and all of a sudden the Princess raised those eyes upwards, exclaiming, "It is for thee, O Lord, in thine own good time, to show whose hand did really wield this weapon to perpetrate the tragedy of that foul night!"

And it was the eye of that Deity alone to whom the eastern lady thus solemnly appealed, that beheld her as she stood there, in the midst of that sumptuously furnished saloon, with the air of a Pythoness,—one arm stretched forth, and the hand grasping the handle of the dagger—and her countenance wearing an expression of awe-felt solemnity and adjuring entreaty that was in unison with her words. How strikingly grand she looked!—her hair, dark as night, floating in luxuriant masses down her back—her superb bosom upheaved—her posture replete with tragic majesty—and her red lips apart, displaying two rows of pearls within. Wherefore did Indora send up that adjuring prayer to Heaven? why did she seem to think that there was any doubt in respect to the author of a crime which all the world had so unhesitatingly affixed to the hand of Bertram Vivian?

CHAPTER LV.

THE DAGGER.

On the following day, soon after breakfast, the Princess Indora issued forth to ramble over the domain and its neighbourhood. She had desired Purvis to accompany her; and the old man pointed out all the various features of interest: but somehow or another he found himself led on to speak again of the tragedy so intimately connected with Oaklands. The Princess Indora made him describe to her the exact personal appearance of the Duchess Eliza—that of the old Duke her husband—and that of Bertram Vivian. Purvis, naturally garrulous, was never wearied of conversing on a topic which constituted the main incident in his own experiences of life; and thus, if the eastern lady had any secret purpose of her own—or if she were merely impelled by an irresistible feeling of curiosity, to seek information on these points—she could not possibly have addressed herself to a person more competent or more willing to afford it.

Her wanderings with Purvis brought her towards the pond by the side of which the corpse of the murdered Duke was discovered; and there for a few minutes she lingered, gazing upon the very spot where, as Purvis informed her, he and Leachley, the late Duke's valet, had found their lifeless, murdered master.

While retracing their way towards the mansion, the discourse still continued on the same topic; and Indora seemed as willing to hear as the old steward was to impart all details, even the very minutest, in connexion with the topic which appeared to have so profound an interest for them both. Yet the Princess so shaped her questions and so phrased her remarks, that Purvis entertained not the remotest suspicion that she might possibly be impelled by some feeling stronger than mere curiosity. It was about two o'clock when they reached the mansion; and Indora, having partaken of refreshment, walked forth again into the grounds—but this time unattended by the old steward, who was wearied with his ramble of the forenoon. The Princess walked as far as the village, and passed the little inn where Bertram Vivian had his last interview with his brother—then Lord Clandon. The very room had been notified by Purvis, in the minuteness of the details which he had given the Princess; and her eyes were riveted for a minute upon the window of that room. When she pursued her way, tears were trickling from those eyes:—perchance in the natural generosity and kindness of her disposition, she was melted by the thought that within that very room a fellow-creature had endured the most excruciating anguish which the human mind could know!

In the evening the Princess Indora again had an opportunity of conversing with the old steward; and she inquired relative to the other servants who were at Oaklands at the time the tragedy took place. He gave her the same information which he had given to Christian Ashton at the time the youth was at the mansion: namely, that Leachley, the late Duke's valet, was thriving as a farmer about a dozen miles off—that Jane, the Duchess Eliza's favourite maid, had gone mad after the tragic occurrence—and that he alone, of all the domestics who were at Oaklands on the occasion of the Duke's murder, now remained there. After he had given some other particulars respecting a few of those servants who had risen in the world, he said, "And there is the present Duke's valet too—he likewise has risen; and in order to conceal his humble origin he has taken another name."

"Under what circumstances?" asked Indora.

"He has grown rich, my lady," responded Purvis. "His proper name is Travers—his assumed one is Armytage; and his daughter has married a nobleman—Lord Octavian Meredith."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Indora: "the name Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith are not familiar to me. And that Mr. Armytage, of whom, was originally the present Duke's valet—"

"Certainly he was, my lady. When the Duke succeeded to the title after his uncle he appointed Travers to the post of [illegible] little time after that, Travers, it [illegible] herited a considerable sum [illegible] course he left Oakland [illegible] year before I heard a

length Farmer Leachley went up to London on some business; and on his return into Hampshire, he came across to see me. He told me that when in London, he went to pay his respects to his Grace in Belgrave Square—and that as he was issuing forth from the mansion again, he saw a splendid equipage stop at the door, and a well-dressed gentleman alight. He thought that the face was not unfamiliar to him; and though fourteen or fifteen years had elapsed since he last saw Travers, and of course his appearance was altered by time,—yet Leachley speedily remembered where he *had* seen that countenance before; for the well-dressed gentleman descending from his chariot, was none other than Travers. The recognition was mutual: but Travers, evidently much confused, attempted to pass hastily by Leachley. Leachley however was not the man to be cut in this style: he grasped the other's arm, addressing him by the name of Travers.—'Hush, my good friend!' was the response; 'that is no longer my name. I have risen in the world, as you perceive; and you must call me Mr. Armytage. There is no harm, I fancy, in a man choosing to conceal his plebeian origin when he moves in the highest society and is the companion of the best of the aristocracy. I shall take it as a kindness, for old friendship's sake, if you will keep the little matter as secret as possible.'—Leachley assured him that he had no wish to injure or annoy him in any way—but that on the contrary he was glad to find he had such good reason for a change of name. This made Mr. Armytage, as he chooses to call himself, very civil indeed; and he invited Leachley to his house in the Regent's Park: but as Leachley was coming back into Hampshire that very day, he could not avail himself of Mr. Armytage's kindness."

"But it appears that this Mr. Leachley, of whom you are speaking," said the Princess, "failed not to communicate the secret to you?"

"Oh! there was no harm in his telling me, my lady," replied Purvis, "as I never go up to London, and therefore have no opportunity of betraying him, even if I had the inclination—which of course I have not: for there is no harm in his having changed his name—but, on the contrary, everything to his credit that he should have got on so well as to have such good ground for doing it."

By the time this conversation was ended, the Princess and the old steward had completed their ramble; and the mansion was reached. As Indora entered the hall, she perceived a certain bustle amongst the domestics, who were hurrying to and fro; and one of them, stepping up to Purvis, hastily whispered something in his ear. Indora took no visible notice of it—but ascending to her chamber, put off her walking attire, and then repaired to the drawing-room. As she en-
ed, a tall aristocratic-looking individual rose
a sofa on which he was seated; and advancing
her, bowed with courteous respect. For a
—and only for a moment—there was a
nd ominous glitter in the dark eyes of
ut the Duke perceived it not—for it
the time he raised his looks to her
again.
to announce myself as the Duke
"The Duchess and I,
me to the conclusion
that it would be discourteous if we presented not ourselves here during at least a portion of the period of your ladyship's sojourn, to do the hospitalities of Oaklands."

"I am exceedingly flattered by this kindness on the part of your lordship and her Grace," responded Indora: and then she looked around as if in search of the Duchess of Marchmont.

"Her Grace has charged me to offer your ladyship a thousand apologies," the Duke hastened to say, "that she is not enabled to present herself this evening. Her Grace is in very delicate health: the journey from London in such sultry weather has indisposed her; and on the very moment of our arrival, a quarter of an hour back, she was forced to retire to her apartment."

"And it is on my account," exclaimed Indora, with an air of vexation, "that her Grace undertook a journey which has thus indisposed her!"

"Her Grace will be completely recovered by the morning," replied Marchmont: then thinking that he might now venture upon a little compliment, in the hope of breaking the ceremonious formality of the discourse, he added, "And the pleasure which her Grace cannot fail to share with me in being honoured by your ladyship's presence here, will amply compensate for her indisposition of this evening."

Indora turned aside for a moment to take a seat: and again did that glitter, so strange and so ominous, appear in her eyes—but again too did Marchmont fail to observe it.

"I hope," he said, "that during the short time your ladyship has already sojourned beneath this roof, you have experienced every attention——"

"I ought perhaps," interrupted Indora, "at the very first moment when your Grace announced yourself, to have expressed my gratitude for your kindness and that of the Duchess in placing Oaklands at my disposal. I can assure your lordship I have been much interested——"

"I am truly charmed to hear your ladyship thus speak," exclaimed the Duke. "Perhaps you will forgive me for saying that in addition to the desire to render the hospitalities of Oaklands as acceptable to your ladyship as possible, I was anxious to hasten hither—and of course the Duchess likewise—to form the acquaintance of a lady of whom Madame Angelique spoke in such rapturous terms."

"I cannot feel otherwise than flattered," answered Indora, with every appearance of the most courteous affability, "by the kind mention which Madame Angelique must evidently have made of me."

"As Madame Angelique is a truth-speaking woman," rejoined the Duke, "she could not do otherwise than mention your ladyship in the terms which alone are appropriate. Might I be excused for expressing my surprise that a lady who is a native of a far distant clime, should be so conversant with the English tongue? Perhaps your ladyship has seen much of the English in India. But if so, how was it," he asked with a smile, "that none was fortunate enough to win a hand which a monarch might rejoice to possess?"

"I saw very little of the English in India," answered Indora, not choosing to have even the appearance of noticing the compliment with which the Duke's speech wound up.

"Perhaps, then," he continued, as if with the good-humoured familiarity which a host felt himself justified in using towards his guest, "your ladyship has visited England with a determination of subduing all hearts, and eventually bestowing the prize on the one that may seem most devoted?"

"Indeed your lordship is uselessly bewildering yourself with conjectures which are remote enough from the actual fact:"—and though Indora spoke somewhat gravely, yet her manner continued perfectly courteous. "And now," she added, "as I am exceedingly fatigued with my day's rambles, I must beg your Grace to forgive me if I retire to rest."

She rose from her seat; and Marchmont, first flying to ring the bell, next hastened to open the door. As the Princess passed, he proffered his hand: but she either did not really see it—or else affected not to perceive it; and with a courteous inclination of the head, she quitted the room. On reaching her own chamber she was attended upon by two of the female-servants of the establishment; and she remarked, as if quite in a casual way, "So you have the Duchess here now?"

"Yes, my lady," replied one of the women, at the same time exchanging a rapidly significant look with her fellow-servant.

"I hope that her Grace's indisposition is only slight?" resumed the Princess.

"There is little doubt," was the answer, "that her Grace will be quite well in the morning."

"It is to be sincerely hoped so," said Indora,—"and the more so by me, inasmuch as I am assured by the Duke it was entirely on my account her Grace undertook a journey which has thus rendered her indisposed."

Again did the two servants exchange quick looks of meaning: but Indora appeared to notice them not. They assisted her throughout her night-toilet; and when she was prepared for rest, they withdrew.

The reader will scarcely require to be informed that the Duchess of Marchmont was not at Oaklands at all. This portion of the Duke's stratagem was an afterthought, and an improvement (as he considered it) upon the plan of proceedings originally laid down by Madame Angelique. He had reasoned to himself that as he was perfectly unacquainted with Indora, except by sight, it would be expedient for him to have at least an hour's interview with her ere he carried his plot into execution,—so that he might be enabled to form a better estimate of her disposition and character than he could do from Madame Angelique's description. He was moreover impatient to find himself in the presence of that eastern lady whose superb charms had made such an impression upon him on the two occasions that he had caught a glimpse of her at a distance. Thus he had come down to Oaklands for the purpose of introducing himself to Indora; and immediately on his arrival he had issued positive instructions to the domestics to the effect that they were to support his tale of the Duchess being likewise beneath that roof. This was the hint that was whispered to Purvis by one of the footmen, as the old steward entered the hall after attending Indora in her evening ramble.

And what were the Duke of Marchmont's feelings when he *did* find himself in the presence of the Princess? If he had admired her from a distance, how infinite became that admiration on beholding her close! The grandeur of her beauty exceeded even what he had expected to find it: the glory of her charms excited all his most fervid passions. It was indeed with difficulty that he could conceal the joy of anticipated triumph when conversing with her in the drawing-room. In all respects she seemed faultless in his eyes,—a being whom he would give half his fortune to possess. Marriage had consigned a charming creature to his arms—the gold of that luxurious patrician had purchased the rarest beauties of every clime, until he had grown sated with pleasure, and like the Persian monarch craved for a new one. In the Princess Indora he beheld everything calculated to ravish, to dazzle, to excite, and to fascinate: he thought there would be a world of frenzied bliss in achieving this conquest even though it were by force. He had devoured her with his eyes even while rendering the expression of his looks most courteously respectful; and when, on her retiring, he was left alone in the drawing-room, he sate feasting his imagination with the pleasure that he conceived to be in store for himself.

But let us return to Indora. When the two female-servants had retired—and even while the door was yet closing behind them—that strange glitter appeared in her eyes: and her rich red lips were wreathed with an expression of ineffable scorn. She turned towards one of the boxes she had brought with her—unlocked it—and took thence something, which she thrust under the pillow of the couch. Then she was on the point of enveloping herself in an elegant muslin wrapper, when her ear caught a gentle tap at the door; and as her glances were flung in that direction, she beheld a piece of paper thrust underneath. She hastened to pick it up, and read therein these lines:—

"Lady, beware! A foul treachery is intended. The Duchess is *not* here: the Duke came alone. Burn this. You can guess from whom it comes—and be upon your guard."

Indora comprehended that this was an instance of the generous kindness and the honourable feeling of the old steward. She hastened to apply the paper to the wax-light; and when it had caught the flame, she tossed it into the fire-place. Then just as she was again about to put on the wrapper,—evidently with the air of one who knew what was about to happen, and meant to be in all modest decency prepared to meet the emergency,—the door opened, and the Duke hastily entered.

"Ah!" ejaculated Indora: and springing to the head of the couch, she snatched from beneath the pillow the dagger which she had placed there: then as she raised it in her right hand—her left lifting the night drapery over her bosom—s' said, in a voice of resolute sternness, "You k this weapon well: it shall drink your heart's if you dare approach me!"

Language has no power to convey an the ghastly horror which seized upon the Marchmont, as he caught sight of that his countenance became livid—he start then staggered as if smitten

"Begone!" exclaimed I

were the power which she wielded at the moment,—whether it were by the mingled scorn, indignation, and defiance of her looks—whether it were by the menacing air she had assumed—or by the terrible recollections which the sight of the dagger vividly conjured up in the mind of the Duke,—certain it is that he at once obeyed her; and still pale as death, trembling in every limb, and like a conscience-stricken being, he dragged himself from the room.

Immediately afterwards the Princess Indora rang her bell violently—and then hastened to lock up the dagger again in the box where she had previously secured it. The summons was speedily answered by one of the maids who had previously attended upon her; and Indora said in a calm firm voice, "I choose not to sleep here alone: you must remain with me for the rest of the night."

Having thus spoken, she locked the door of the chamber; and placing the key under the pillow, lay down on the couch,—bidding the maid undress herself and share it with her. The young woman ventured not a single question, nor even a word of comment: she comprehended full well that the Duke had experienced an indignant repulse; and in her heart she was far from sorry—for even in the short time that Indora had been beneath that roof, her amiable manners had made a certain impression on all the domestics who had happened to come in contact with her.

Thus the night was passed by the virtuous and well-principled Indora in fullest security: but it was not as a guarantee for such security that she had insisted upon the companionship of the servant-woman. She had no fear that the Duke would renew his infamous attempt: it was in order that not the slightest breath of suspicion might tarnish her fair fame—that no whisper of scandal might have even the faintest ground to asperse her honour, that she had rung thus violently for the dependant, and commanded that dependant to remain with her throughout the night.

But how was this night passed by the Duke of Marchmont? We cannot tell. The eye of heaven alone beheld him in the solitude of his own chamber, to which—baffled, defeated, ghastly, and trembling—he retired. But to judge by his appearance when he issued from that chamber at an early hour in the morning, the night must have been a terrible one for him. He looked as if his limbs had not been once stretched upon his couch—as if his eye-lids had not for a single moment closed in slumber: so haggard and careworn was he, that he appeared as if a preternatural hand had seized upon him and hurled him in a moment a dozen years onward along the pathway of time.

On issuing from that chamber between six and seven in the morning, he bore a letter in his hand; and summoning a female domestic, bade her take the letter to the eastern lady's apartment, and bring him back the response. Its contents were limited to a few lines,—declaring that dazzled by her beauty, and infatuated to a degree that overwhelmed his reason, he had obeyed an impulse which was irresistible—that in the humblest terms he implored her forgiveness—and that he besought her to grant a five minutes' interview before her departure, which he would do the moment that interview was over. The response which the servant brought back, was a verbal one,—to the effect that the eastern lady would grant the Duke a five minutes' interview, for the purpose of receiving the renewed expression of his contrition, in the drawing-room, and in about half-an-hour.

And during that half-hour the wretched Marchmont paced to and fro in the drawing-room,—the most restless anxiety gleaming in his eyes, and displaying itself in the quivering of his ashy lips. At length the door opened—and the Princess made her appearance. She was apparelled in a plain but neat travelling-costume,—the dress reaching up to her throat, but fitting tightly to the form, and thus displaying the superb contours of that grandly symmetrical shape. There was a certain coldness in her looks, which covered any other deeper feeling; and as she advanced into the room, she said in a voice that was as glacially emotionless as her aspect, "You wish to speak to me, my lord?"

"For heaven's sake, lady," exclaimed the miserable Duke, "tell me what I am to expect at your hands? I know the outrage was abominable——"

"But the Duke of Marchmont is capable of anything," interrupted the Princess, "where his evil passions are concerned."

"But that scene last night," ejaculated the Duke, "appeared to have——Perdition!" he vehemently cried: "I know not what to say!——I mean that it had a significancy——"

"Assuredly so," answered Indora. "It had the significancy belonging to the fixed determination of a virtuous woman to defend her honour, even though she stretched its assailant dead at her feet."

"But wherefore, lady—wherefore," asked the Duke, trembling nervously from head to foot; "did you arm yourself with that—that dagger?"

"It is the custom of my country," was Indora's cold response, "for a woman when in a strange place, to surround herself with all suitable defences."

"Then you picked up that weapon somewhere by accident—only by accident?" cried the Duke.

"Yes—by accident," was Indora's answer, still glacially given.

"But where? where?" demanded the Duke: and his scrutinizing regards were fixed keenly upon the lady's countenance, as if to penetrate whether any ulterior thought or feeling, motive or significancy, lay hidden beneath that icily dignified aspect.

"Where did I find the dagger?" she said: "it was in one of the rooms of the mansion. But why question me thus? Methought, my lord, that I was to hear the humblest apology——Yet no!" she indignantly exclaimed—and now her eyes flashed fire. "No language in the world has power to convey an excuse for such villany as yours. I will tell you frankly, my lord, that I read your purpose—I was not deceived by the miserably shallow artifice so flimsily wrapped up in the tale of your wife's arrival and indisposition. Consequently I was prepared—and you know how well!"

"But will you not pardon me? will you not pronounce the word *forgiveness!*" cried the Duke,

who was evidently bewildered—indeed half-frenzied by the thoughts that were agitating in his whirling brain.

"Forgiveness? No!"—and Indora at once turned to leave the drawing-room.

"For heaven's sake, stop!" cried the Duke, hastening towards her in a supplicating manner. "If you will not grant me your pardon, at all events give me the assurance that you will do me no injury!"

"I have triumphed so effectually in the circumstances to which you allude," replied Indora, "that I need scarcely hesitate to promise that it is my purpose to keep silent in respect to your infamy. But understand me well,—that if you dare breathe a single syllable prejudicial to my honour—if it come to my knowledge that when heated with wine, and in that boasting mood which at times takes possession of all libertines, you have proclaimed the fact that I was a visitress here,—in a word, my lord, if you have the hardihood to make an allusion to me in the least way disrespectful, that moment shall I be absolved from my pledge—I will go before a magistrate—I will acquaint him with all that occurred—not even omitting"—and here Indora's dark eyes were fixed penetratingly upon the Duke—"not even omitting, I say, the circumstance how I defended myself with that self-same dagger which dealt death to the uncle whose title and fortune you inherited!"

Having thus spoken, the Princess Indora issued from the drawing-room; and the Duke, closing the door behind her, threw himself upon a sofa and gave way to his agitated reflections. In a few minutes a domestic entered, saying, "The Lady Indora has ordered your Grace's plain carriage to be immediately gotten in readiness, to take her to the nearest post-town; and she will leave Oaklands in less than half-an-hour."

The Duke gave no answer; and the domestic withdrew. Marchmont comprehended wherefore the message had been sent: it was to give him to understand that as Indora was on the point of taking her departure, it was not necessary for him to fulfil the pledge given her in his hastily written note, that he would quit the mansion immediately after the interview which he had besought her to grant.

The carriage was soon in readiness and the Princess departed from Oaklands,—having left in the hands of Purvis a liberal sum of money to be divided amongst the domestics—although the generality of them little deserved this bounty at her hands, inasmuch as they had been prepared to follow their master's instructions in respect to supporting the tale of the Duchess being beneath that roof. We may observe that munificent indeed was the present which Indora made to the steward for his own special behoof; and she had found an opportunity of expressing her thanks for the well-meant note which he had thrust under her door. But she said nothing to him in respect to the dagger.

The Duke of Marchmont beheld Indora's departure from the drawing-room window; and the instant the carriage drove away, he sped up-stairs to the room which she had occupied. He searched everywhere for that dagger—but he discovered it not: it was nowhere in the chamber. Returning to the drawing-room, he was on the point of ringing the bell with a view of putting certain questions to Purvis; but he thought better of it, and repaired to the breakfast-parlour. He had no appetite—but he was sore athirst: his throat felt as if he had been swallowing ashes. He ordered wine,—some choice specimen of the light and cooling vintage of the Rhine; and when he had partaken copiously thereof, he proceeded to his dressing-room to make some improvement in his toilet. Afterwards he wandered out upon his domain; and for hours he reflected upon all that had occurred—or we should rather say that he continued to be harassed and agitated by a variety of the most painful thoughts.

On returning to the mansion as the dinner-hour approached, he again felt an inclination to put certain inquiries to Purvis; and again was he by a second thought prevented. The dinner passed,—that dinner to which he sate down all alone; and when it was over, he again went wandering about like an unsettled spirit. When the dusk was closing in, he re-entered the mansion; and as he repaired to the drawing-room, one of the domestics preceded him with wax-lights. Then, as if his mind was suddenly made up in respect to a point on which he had so often hesitated throughout this agitated day, the Duke abruptly said to the domestic, "Bid Purvis come hither!"

In a few minutes the old steward entered the apartment: but even still the Duke felt disinclined to approach the particular topic. At length however he said, "Purvis, something so strange occurred last night, that I have made up my mind to speak to you on the subject——and yet it is so painful a one that you will not wonder I have throughout this day dreaded to approach it."

The old steward was utterly at a loss to conjecture what could have thus occurred,—though on the other hand he was scarcely at a loss to comprehend what the painful topic must be; for whenever such an allusion was made beneath that roof, it was always at once taken for granted that it referred to the tragedy of nineteen years back.

"The fact is, Purvis," continued the Duke, "I had some little design in respect to that lady: but of course that's my own affair, and nothing to do with any of my servants. I was misled as to her character—I thought she was inclined to be gay, whereas I found the very reverse to be the case. However, the point on which I desired to speak with you, may be explained in a few words. Last night, Purvis, I found that lady armed with a weapon of defence—and the weapon was——you know what I mean! It was the same identical one which my wretched brother used——"

"That dagger, my lord?" cried the old steward, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"Yes—and I see that you know something about it!" exclaimed the Duke. "Come, tell me! Think you that it is a pleasant thing for me to have paraded before my eyes that memorial of the terrible past?"

"My lord, I am deeply sorry," said Purvis, "but I begin to understand——"

"Explain yourself!—hasten to explain your Tell me the whole truth, whatever Marchmont was labouring under the ment of suspense.

"My lord," rejoined Purvis, "I

thing that I can hesitate to explain. I conducted the lady over the mansion; and amongst other places, I showed her the cabinet in which divers family relics and various curiosities are kept——"

"Yes, yes—the one opening from the grand saloon!" ejaculated the Duke. "But about that dagger?"

"It has been kept in that cabinet, my lord, for many, many years past——"

"And wherefore was it kept? who gave you such an order?"

"No one, my lord," answered the steward; "and I cannot define the feeling which has thus prompted me to keep it. It was always secured and placed out of sight in a secret drawer: I showed it to the lady for curiosity's sake—and I remember perfectly well that she questioned me as to the mode of opening that secret drawer. I saw no harm in giving her the explanation she sought——"

"Well, well," cried the Duke, stamping his foot impatiently; "it was through your folly that the weapon thus fell into her hands! But, come—let us see whether she has restored it to its place—or whether she has taken it away with her?"

"Taken it away, my lord?" cried Purvis: "she would not do such a thing as that! Indeed, I wonder that one so well-behaved——"

"Cease you prating, and come!" ejaculated the Duke: then snatching up one of the wax-candles, he hurried from the room.

Purvis followed him close; and they proceeded towards the saloon with the marble pillars, the costly draperies, and the exquisite specimens of sculpture. At the very moment the Duke of Marchmont burst in with the feverish haste which inspired him, he stopped short; and something like an ejaculation of terror burst from his lips, while his eyes were riveted in a particular direction.

"What is it, my lord?" inquired Purvis, catching the infection of the Duke's terror, but yet not comprehending the cause.

"Did you not perceive how the drapery at that end—I mean close by the door of the cabinet—was suddenly and strongly agitated?"—and the Duke's countenance was very pale as he spoke.

"No, my lord," answered Purvis; "I did not notice it. It must either have been your Grace's fancy—or else it was the wind."

"Yes, it was doubtless a draught caused by the sudden opening of this door!"—and the Duke advanced into the saloon, still carrying the wax-light in his hand.

As they drew near the cabinet, Marchmont's looks were thrown upon the drapery which he had either seen, or fancied to have seen for an instant swaying to and fro: but it was now completely still. Still there was a certain vague terror in Marchmont's soul; and he would have looked behind those hangings, were it not that he was ashamed to display his fears in the presence of the steward.

"Open the cabinet, Purvis," he said: and the order was at once obeyed. "Now let us see whether the dagger be here."

As irresistibly drawn, remained standing upon the threshold of the door, for it now stood open, herself and the drapery which a few moments had excited his apprehension.

Purvis touched the secret spring—opened the drawer—and said, "Yes, look, my lord! the weapon is there!"

At that very instant the wax-light was dashed from Marchmont's hand; and the saloon was enveloped in total darkness. The Duke, with a loud moan, fell heavily upon the carpet; and Purvis was seized with so awful a terror that he felt as if his senses were abandoning him.

"My lord, my lord!" he at length murmured: and in the utter darkness of the place he felt his way to the Duke, who lay stretched upon the floor. Still under the influence of the direst, awfullest terror, the old steward entertained the horrible apprehension that some assassin-blow had been dealt at his master. He swept his hands over the prostrate form—inanimate too as well as prostrate: but they encountered no weapon nor oozing blood. Then Purvis ran out into the corridor—but with his hair almost standing on end as he traversed the spacious saloon; for the frightful thought was racking his mind that amidst the total darkness which prevailed, a mischief might be done by unseen hands upon himself. However, he passed without molestation into the corridor; and thence he took a lamp which was burning there. As he re-entered the saloon with the light, his glances were flung in quick nervous anxiety around: but he beheld no one except the prostrate form of his ducal master stretched near the threshold of the cabinet. On approaching nearer, he perceived that Marchmont was now recovering, and that there was no appearance about his person of any injury sustained. A long gasping moan came slowly from his lips; and raising himself partially up, he looked with wild haggard eyes around him: then as his regards settled upon the steward, he said, "Good heavens, Purvis! what could that have been? what followed when I sank down in unconsciousness?"

"Get up, my lord," cried the old steward, in a state of feverish excitement: "let us alarm the household—there must be robbers in the place!"

"No, no—be quiet!" said the Duke, now rising up to his feet: and Purvis recoiled in actual dismay from the ghastly horror which was depicted on Marchmont's countenance. "Tell me," continued the Duke, speaking in a deep hollow voice, "what did you hear? what sound did you catch? were any words spoken?"

"I know not, my lord—I cannot recollect. My ideas are still all in confusion:"—and Purvis looked around him in a species of bewildered consternation.

"But you *must* recollect!" exclaimed the Duke impatiently; "you did not lose your consciousness——"

"But I well nigh lost my senses, my lord," was the steward's remark, which under less grave and fearful circumstances would have appeared ludicrous enough. "I tell your Grace there must be robbers in the mansion!—let us raise an alarm!"

"No—I command you to remain here, and to be quiet!" said the Duke sternly: and he appeared now to have almost regained his wonted self-possession. "Here—give me that lamp."

"The dagger is safe!" ejaculated Purvis, as his eyes, plunging into the cabinet, fell upon the weapon which lay in the drawer that was open; and its bright blade reflected the beams of the lamp.

"Why did you say that?" demanded the Duke, turning so sharply round upon the old man that he shrank back in affright.

"I merely thought, my lord, that some evil-disposed person might possibly have clutched at the weapon——"

"Silence!" exclaimed the Duke sternly: and with the lamp in his hand, he proceeded to examine behind all the flowing draperies which hung between the marble pillars on one side of the saloon.

But no one was to be seen: and Marchmont, again accosting Purvis, said to him, "Recollect—gather your ideas together—reflect well! Did you hear no footsteps? was there no sound of any one beating a retreat immediately after that candle was dashed from my hand? or did you catch a glimpse of any one—for you were looking towards me at the moment?—did you behold no person suddenly emerge from behind the door the instant previous to this strange occurrence?"

The steward raised his hand to his forehead, as if to steady the thoughts that were still agitating with some degree of confusion in his brain: and at the expiration of a minute, he said, "Yes, my lord,—it does seem to me that I caught a glimpse of something——"

"And that something?" demanded the Duke quickly.

"Stop, my lord! If your Grace hurries me, I shall lose the ideas which now seem to be coming back into my mind:"—and Purvis still kept his hand up to his forehead, as he slowly and deliberately gave utterance to those words. "Yes—I certainly did see something, now that I recollect. It was like a tall dark form—but I saw no face——"

"Are you sure, Purvis, that you saw anything

at all?" inquired the Duke, with a strange expression of countenance: "or are these mere imaginings—the result of consternation and terror?"

"No, my lord," replied the old steward, in a tone of confidence: "now that I can collect my thoughts, I seem to have a perfect recollection that I *did* behold a tall dark form suddenly appear behind your Grace, as you stood in the doorway with your back towards the saloon and your face towards the cabinet:—then the next instant the candle was dashed from your hand, and all was utter darkness. I think I heard footsteps—but of that I am not so sure: for it was then that I was seized with such a fearful terror——"

"Let us examine the carpet!" suddenly ejaculated the Duke.

With these words, he held the lamp low down, and carefully scrutinized the carpet behind the door and likewise behind the drapery: but there were no marks of footsteps; and the steward said, "Your Grace will perceive that the pile of the carpet, although so thick, rises up again into an even surface wherever it has been trodden upon. Our own steps leave no marks."

"True!" cried the Duke: and desisting from the examination, he said in a solemn voice, "Reflect well, Purvis—examine well your recollections! Can you speak confidently as to the sounds of footsteps?"

Again the old steward raised his hand to his forehead; and after a minute's deep reflection, he said, "No, my lord—I cannot for the life of me speak with any degree of certainty upon this point. But what does it matter?—does your Grace think," asked the old man ingenuously, yet with a half appalled air of consternation, "that if there were no sounds of footsteps, it must have been an apparition?"

"Lock up that drawer and follow me," said the Duke in a low deep voice: and again did Purvis shrink back in dismay from the ghastly pallor of his countenance.

The old steward closed the drawer containing the dagger—shut the door with the secret spring—and closing the cabinet door likewise, he followed the Duke, who paced slowly and thoughtfully towards the farther extremity of the saloon.

"Purvis," he said, stopping short as he reached the door leading into the passage with which the saloon communicated, "this strange and incomprehensible occurrence——No, not incomprehensible!" he abruptly ejaculated: "for, as you yourself have suggested, it must have been some evil-disposed person who was concealed there, and who adopted that stratagem to make his escape in the darkness——But as I was about to say, we must keep this incident a secret. We should only be laughed at if we were to relate what has occurred. Do you understand me? I will not have all the gossips of the neighbourhood telling their idle tales about Oaklands,—the result of which would be that we should not get a servant to live with us; and as for visitors coming here again, it would be out of the question. So, mark me well!—it is my will that what has occurred be kept secret. Compose your looks before you go amongst the servants again this evening."

"I will attend to all your Grace's instructions," replied Purvis, who was in most instances accustomed to pay implicit obedience to the mandates of his master.

The Duke then returned to the drawing-room—while the steward repaired to his own apartment: for he felt that his countenance still wore a sufficient degree of trouble to excite the suspicions of his fellow-servants if he went amongst them at once.

By eleven o'clock the entire household had withdrawn to their respective apartments; and silence reigned throughout the spacious mansion.

CHAPTER LVI.

A NIGHT AT OAKLANDS.

It was past midnight; and the old steward was just sinking into that state of dreamy repose which precedes a deeper slumber,—for he had been lying awake, thinking of the incidents in the saloon,—when all of a sudden he was startled by his door opening; and a cry of terror was nearly bursting from his lips as his looks fell upon what appeared to be the countenance of a corpse. But in an instant he recognised the Duke of Marchmont, the ghastly pallor of whose face looked ghastlier still as the light of the candle which he carried streamed upon it. He had thrown his dressing-gown over his shoulders,—thus having evidently quitted his chamber in a haste too precipitate to enable him to put it on properly. The wildest horror was in his looks; and with staggering steps he advanced into the room. Closing the door behind him, he placed the candlestick on the chest of drawers, and threw himself on a seat,—his whole manner and appearance giving him the aspect of one who had just seen some hideous spectacle or passed through a phase of appalling terror.

"Good heavens, my lord, what is the matter?" asked Purvis, smitten with the conviction that something fresh of a dreadful character had occurred: "what is the matter, my lord——for God's sake, speak!"

But the Duke could not give utterance to a syllable; and still he continued to stare in wildest ghastliest horror upon the old steward, who himself was quivering throughout every nerve and fibre.

"My lord, for heaven's sake speak!—what is it? what is it?" he shudderingly asked.

"I know not—it must have been a dream!" replied Marchmont, but in a voice so deep and hollow that as it smote upon the ears of Purvis it sent forth dismay to the innermost recesses of his soul.

"A dream, my lord?" he said: "what dream could have produced this effect? Perhaps it was the result——"

"Yes—it must have been," rejoined Marchmont, but evidently with the air of one who sought to force upon himself a belief that was in antagonism with his own deeply settled conviction.

Purvis continued to regard his ducal master, whose countenance still denoted the unutterable horror and awful consternation which he had been

experiencing. His eyes sank beneath the looks of the old steward: a profound sigh—or perhaps more correctly speaking, a low long moan expressive of deepest inward agony, issued from his lips.

"But what was this dream, my lord?" asked Purvis.

The Duke did not immediately answer: he was evidently uncertain whether to give an explanation or not—until at length yielding to some irresistible impulse, he said, "Listen—and I will tell you."

"Shall I procure your Grace some wine? or will your lordship take a glass of water?" inquired the old steward: for Marchmont appeared as if he were about to suffocate.

"I will help myself," was his response: and rising from his seat, he moved to where there was a decanter of water.

Filling a tumbler with hands which trembled so that the decanter and the glass jarred against each other, he raised the refreshing beverage to his lips; and it is scarcely a figure of speech to say that the water went hissing down his parched throat as if it were pouring over hot iron. Then he resumed the chair whence he had risen: but Purvis noticed that his countenance was almost as ghastly pale, though perhaps less convulsed than at first.

"Sleep was stealing upon me," he thus commenced his explanation in the same low deep voice as before,—"when I felt as if gradually awakening for some reason that I could not comprehend. I cannot remember now——indeed I knew not at the time whether it was a sound in the room, or whether a hand touched me, or whether a voice addressed me—but certain it is that I was thus unaccountably awakened from my slumber—— And yet," ejaculated the Duke, suddenly interrupting himself, at the same time that he started up from the chair, "it could only have been mere fancy—and nothing else! It is useless thus to enter upon the explanation of an idle dream!"

"Yes—useless, my lord," remarked Purvis, "if the subject be painful."

"Why did you say that?" demanded the Duke, turning abruptly towards the old man as he sate up in his bed.

"My lord—my lord," stammered Purvis, who really had meant nothing more than his words had conveyed; "I—I—beg your Grace's pardon—but—but—I really——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Duke; "you see that all these things naturally render me nervous and excited——I mean that those mysterious incidents which occurred ere we went to bed——"

"They naturally made a certain impression, my lord," replied the steward. "For myself, I candidly confess that I was thinking of them until the very moment that sleep came upon my eyes."

"You said nothing about it to the servants, Purvis?" asked the Duke quickly.

"Certainly not, my lord: it was your Grace's order to the contrary."

"To be sure! It were needless to frighten them:"—and the Duke lingered in the steward's chamber with every appearance of one who was afraid to return to his own. "About this dream of mine!" he continued, after a pause, during which he first sate down—then rose up—and then sate down again, in a nervous restless manner: "about this dream of mine, Purvis—— I have a great mind to go on telling you what it was."

But Marchmont once more stopped short: he evidently did not want to continue on the same topic—and yet his mind was irresistibly led by some strong influence to hover around it, painful though it were.

"I was telling you that I had fallen asleep, when something awoke me. The night-lamp was burning as usual in the room—and I looked about me, but I saw nothing. The lamp was visibly growing fainter and fainter—there was a wax-candle on the night-table upon one side of the bed—and I lighted it: but as I turned round, I beheld on the other side what seemed to me to be the tall form of a man enveloped in a cloak, and holding the cloak in such a way up to his countenance as to veil it completely from my view."

Here the Duke again stopped short,—leaving Purvis in a species of awful suspense.

"And what did your Grace do?" he at length asked as the Duke continued silent.

"To confess the truth, Purvis," was the response, "I was seized—or rather fancied I was——for of course it was all a dream——but it appeared to me in this dream that I was seized with so sudden a terror I lay like one paralyzed. It was that sort of petrifaction of the frame, though the senses were all keenly alive, which takes possession of one when under the influence of a nightmare. Then that dark shape seemed to bend down over me——Is it not extraordinary, Purvis? But if I were to tell you all, you would agree with me that it cannot be anything else than mere fancy?"

But the Duke of Marchmont was still in such a state of trembling nervousness that his condition, both physical and mental, proved how impossible it was to beguile himself into the belief that it was a dream: for again he rose from his seat—again he paced to and fro in an agitated manner—and then he sate down once more.

"A form bent, I say," he continued, still irresistibly impelled to hover around the subject, like a moth fluttering about a candle,—"it bent over me——of course in my dream, you understand?—and it spoke a few words in such a deep unearthly voice that the blood ran cold in my veins ——No matter what it said—I forget—I did not hear—I could not for worlds repeat it!——Perdition seize upon me! I am losing my senses!"

The Duke stamped his foot violently upon the floor as he gave vent to that imprecation: and again springing up from the chair, he paced nervously to and fro. The old steward was seriously alarmed: for he began to suspect that his master's intellects had received a shock and were somewhat deranged. He had not failed to notice the extraordinary and incongruous expressions which had fallen from his lips in regard to the words breathed in his ear by the tall cloaked form that either in imagination or in reality had bent over him. And now too Marchmont's face was ghastly pale and as convulsed as it was when he first entered the chamber; and the old steward tremblingly asked whether he should arouse the household and send off for medical assistance?

"Not for worlds!" ejaculated the Duke, with strange vehemence: then he immediately added,

"You would not have me render myself ridiculous in the presence of all the servants? It is enough that I have thus found my way to your chamber. But you will not breathe a syllable of all this? you will keep it inviolably secret? Tell me, Purvis—— tell me——"

"Yes, my lord—rest assured that I will do what you command. But about the dream?" added Purvis, hesitatingly: and his curiosity was poignantly excited.

"Ah! about the dream?" repeated the Duke: "you wish to know the rest?" and in a sort of half-bewildered manner he sank down upon the chair again. "I tell you, Purvis, that the form bent over me——I mean, you understand, that it appeared to do so——and it said some words—and it breathed a name—and that name was its own—for thus did it announce itself——And the name——"

"And the name, my lord?" repeated the steward, in the low half-hushed tone of an awe-felt suspense, as if he expected to hear that it was the name of one from the grave which had thus been spoken.

"The name?" said the Duke, gazing in a species of vacant horror and dismay upon the old man: "that name was——Bertram Vivian!"

The steward started in such a way that the whole bed shook under him; and Marchmont likewise started as if that sound itself had galvanised him with a new terror.

"Yes—it was my brother's name," he continued, in a low hollow voice; "and therefore it *must* have been a dream! For if it were not, then was it a shape from the other world——"

"Yes, my lord," rejoined the steward, in solemn tones: "for if your brother were alive, he would not revisit the seat of his crime!"

Marchmont looked in an appalled vacant horror around; and for upwards of a minute there was a profound silence in that room.

"And what followed, my lord?" at length asked the steward, who was evidently under the influence of an awe-inspiring superstitious terror.

"I hardly know," responded Marchmont wildly, "whether I fainted—whether I lay petrified and bathed in a cold perspiration—whether the object vanished suddenly—or whether I saw that dark shape issue from the chamber, opening and closing the door just as the living man would do——I cannot tell! All my thoughts are in confusion when I endeavour to concentrate them on that point! In a word, I cannot rightly remember anything more until the instant that I found myself here, in your room."

"All this is most extraordinary," said Purvis, who was wrapped in a kind of solemnly superstitious bewilderment. "If your Grace's brother be no more, wherefore should his spirit come to haunt your Grace's slumbers? But if he be alive——"

"No, no, Purvis—it was all a dream! Tell me you were sure it was naught but a dream?" and it was in a paroxysm of indescribable anguish and horror—with a countenance ghastly pale—that the Duke, hastily approaching the bed, clutched the old steward forcibly by the wrist.

"Yes—it must have been a dream, my lord," responded Purvis.

"I shall go up to London at once!" said Marchmont, with strange abruptness.

"What, my lord? leave in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, to be sure! And why not?" cried the Duke, almost fiercely. "Do I not pay hosts of servants to do my bidding? Let some of the lazy dogs rise and get the carriage in readiness!"

"But, my lord!" Purvis ventured to suggest: "possibly strange things may be said, if your Grace does this——I should be questioned——and what could I say?"

"True!" ejaculated Marchmont, who was evidently bewildered how to act.

"I know, my lord," continued the well-meaning old man, "that it must be a very painful thing for your Grace to have the recollection of long-past occurrences so cruelly revived: for I have not forgotten how dear your brother was to your lordship—and how you loved your poor uncle also——"

"Enough, Purvis!" interrupted the Duke quickly. "I will not leave to-night. But I charge you, my faithful friend—I charge you, Purvis, not to breathe a single syllable——"

"Oh, no, my lord! not for worlds. Does your Grace feel better now?"

"Yes, yes—the effect is passing off—I am almost sorry——But tell me, Purvis, do you not think I am very foolish—very weak-minded to have yielded——"

"No, my lord—not at all," answered the steward: "it was natural enough——"

The Duke of Marchmont drank another tumbler of water: and taking up the wax-candle, bade the steward good night. But as his fingers rested upon the handle of the door, he again turned towards the old man, and enjoined him to the strictest secrecy—an injunction which Purvis for the fifth or sixth time promised to obey. Then the Duke went forth: and if any one had seen him as he moved along the passages and descended the stairs leading to his own apartment, there would have been no cause to envy the lordly owner of the proud domain of Oaklands. His looks were thrown nervously about: the sounds of his own footsteps—his own shadow upon the wall—appeared to smite his very soul with a mortal terror. At length he regained his chamber; and then locking the door, he looked under the bed—behind the curtains—behind the window-draperies also: he passed into his dressing-room—into every nook and corner did he tremblingly and nervously peer, as if afraid to trust himself again to his couch unless previously assured that there was no one in his suite of apartments!

And thus, let the reader rest assured, it often and often is with the patrician dwellers in splendid mansions and in marble palaces. Their lordly titles constitute no patent to guarantee them against the same feelings—the same sensations, to which all the rest of the world are liable. Rank and riches may elevate them to the loftiest pedestals: but their souls move in the same sphere as those of the commonest herd of human beings. They belong to the same earth: they breathe the same atmosphere. Strip them of their robes, and who shall be enabled to single them out as the members of a privileged order? All these circumstances prove the hideous mockery of raising one set of persons high above their fellows. In the aristocratic heaven they may blaze like meteors: but if they fall down upon the earth

they prove to be merely stones. In the eyes of man only does the distinction exist: in the eyes of heaven all are equal. The same atmosphere which is breathed by the most wretched mendicant, passes through the nostrils of a King: the same breeze which ruffles the rags of the crawling beggar, pours its tide into the saloon of beauty and fashion; and the same air also which wafts the plaintive cry of poverty, bears upon its wing the dulcet tones of melody in the drawing-rooms of the high-born and the opulent.

But to continue our tale. When the old steward was once more alone,—his chamber being left in total darkness—he pondered on all that he had heard with a kind of superstitious awe. He could scarcely think that it was all a dream on his ducal master's part. He had said that such was his impression, because he would have said almost anything to allay Marchmont's terrors, and to prevent himself from catching their infection. But he knew the Duke well enough to be certain that he was not thus to be moved by ordinary and fanciful incidents. The conviction was strong within him that he had seen a tall dark shape in the saloon whence the cabinet opened, and that this was no effect of the imagination. Might it not be the same shape which the Duke had likewise seen? But if so, was this shape a real living being? or was it one from another world? If it were the broad daylight, Purvis would no doubt have concluded in favour of the first alternative: but as it was night—he was enveloped in darkness—and still under the influence of that spectacle of horror and dismay which his master had presented to his view, he was far more prone to decide on behalf of the latter.

An hour passed; and slumber was again coming gradually over the eyes of the steward,—when he was startled by hearing the handle of the door turn. It opened—and some one entered.

"Hush!" said the individual in a low deep voice. "Fear not—it is no enemy who seeks you!"

The hair of Purvis had at first stood on end; and now, though his consternation was somewhat mitigated, he was nevertheless unable to give utterance to a word. Through the darkness of the room he beheld a form, darker than that darkness, move towards the side of his couch; and the perspiration stood cold upon his brow.

"You are Purvis?" said that same low deep voice, speaking in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes—I am he," answered the steward shudderingly. "But in the name of heaven, who are you?"

"Your master who has been hither, has doubtless told you," was the slowly given and solemn response.

"Good God, is it possible?" exclaimed the steward, starting up in his couch. "Mr. Bertram Vivian!—or rather Lord Clandon, I should say?"

"Yes—I am that unhappy being," was the rejoinder. "But compose yourself——"

"Oh, what am I to do? what am I to do?" murmured the bewildered steward: for he knew not whether to bid the long lost one avaunt as a blood-stained murderer; or whether to speak to him kindly as one who had perhaps bitterly expiated the past: for that he was innocent the old man dared not think—or else wherefore should he come thus stealthily like a robber in the dead of the night?

"Purvis," said Lord Clandon—for such was the denomination to which Bertram Vivian was entitled,—"I can judge what is passing in your mind. But if I were guilty, it would be useless to declare that long years of penitence have gone far to atone for my crime; because this much you would doubtless comprehend. On the other hand, if I be innocent, the time is not yet come when I can stand in that light before the world. Is it possible, Purvis, that you can so far forget the past—or else suspend your judgment altogether—as to bear with me a few minutes for the present?"

"Yes, yes, my lord," answered the old steward, both bewildered and affected. "What would you with me?—why come so stealthily hither?—why terrify your brother as you have done? Oh, my lord—speak, speak!"

"You must not question me, Purvis," answered Bertram, still speaking in that same low deep tone as before: while in respect to his form, it was scarcely perceptible amidst the obscurity that prevailed; and as for his countenance, no glimpse of it could the old man catch.

"Yes, my lord—there is one question that I must put!" cried Purvis vehemently: and he quivered with suspense. "That unhappy lady—the Duchess Eliza——"

"Purvis, not a syllable in respect to the past!" interrupted Lord Clandon, almost sternly. "Suffer me to question you—and answer me as if you were testifying your compassion towards a man who for many long years has drunk so deeply of the cup of bitterness——"

"My lord," sobbed the old steward, "I am moved as if I were a child!"—for his generous heart was touched by the ineffable mournfulness of the long lost one's tone. "Question me as you choose, and I will answer. But, Oh! if you could only breathe a single word to make me fancy——"

"Purvis, I always knew that you possessed a good heart," interrupted Lord Clandon; "and by everything sacred I adjure you to suspend your judgment concerning me! When to-morrow comes, look upon this visit which I have paid to your chamber, as if it were a dream. But if the conviction rest in your mind that it was a reality, then with equal solemnity do I adjure you to keep upon your lips the seal of an inviolable silence. The time may come—it must come—and shortly too—when that seal shall be lifted; and perhaps, Purvis, you may *then* rejoice that you have borne patiently and kindly with one who has known unhappiness as dire and bitter as mine!"

"Ah, my lord," sobbed the old steward, "when I look back over a number of years and think of what you were when last I saw you—young, handsome, and elegant——"

"Enough, Purvis!" again interrupted Bertram: and now his hand, seeking that of the old steward, pressed it warmly for an instant; and Purvis himself did not shudderingly withdraw that hand of his as if from the grasp of a murderer.

There was a pause of a few moments; and then Bertram said, "You will be surprised at the subject on which I am about to question you. But it is needful—it is of importance——"

"Proceed, my lord—proceed!" cried the old man, who was under an influence which strangely attracted him towards the long lost one.

"There was a lady staying beneath this roof," continued Bertram; "and though unseen myself, I beheld you walking with her."

"Yes, my lord—it was an eastern lady," answered Purvis; "and I regret to add that it was for no honourable motive she was somehow or another led to come hither."

"But she experienced no outrage at my brother's hands?" said Bertram quickly.

The old steward hesitated for a few moments: and then he answered, "I warned her, my lord—yes, I warned her—I considered it to be my duty. She defended herself—and it was——"

But he stopped short: for he was just upon the point of adding something the bare idea of which struck him as fearful to a degree, considering the person to whom he was thus speaking.

"Finish your sentence—and deal with me frankly," said Bertram. "I have particular reasons for the questions which I am now putting, and for those which I may yet have to put."

"No, my lord—I cannot, I cannot!" murmured the old man.

"Purvis, I beseech you—nay, I implore and entreat—by all the misery I have endured——"

"Well, my lord—it was with a certain weapon ——Ah! for heaven's sake do tell me—do, for God's sake justify the wild hope which thrills in my heart! Say the one word which shall make me believe that it was not your hand——"

"Purvis, give not thus way to your feelings," interrupted Lord Clandon; "but for heaven's sake be calm and collected. I understand you. That eastern lady defended herself with a certain weapon. But how came it in her hand? Tell me, Purvis, I conjure you—tell me everything!"

Purvis proceeded to explain,—but with many self-interruptions and impassioned ejaculations, as various thoughts were excited in his mind in rapid succession,—how Indora had arrived at Oaklands —how he had escorted her over the mansion and through the grounds—how she had questioned him much in respect to the long-past tragedy—how he had shown her the fatal weapon, which he had preserved—how she had so mysteriously and stealthily possessed herself of it—how ere her departure she had restored it to the place where it was kept—how the Duke of Marchmont had questioned him on the subject—and how they had gone together to the cabinet to ascertain whether it was there, when the wax-light was so suddenly dashed from his Grace's hand. During this recital, Bertram was frequently compelled to encourage the old man to proceed—to soothe his excited feelings—to check him when he sought to become the questioner—and to induce him to extend his explanations to those details of Indora's ramble to particular spots which specially related to the tragedy of a bygone year. For upwards of an hour did Lord Clandon and the steward thus remain in conversation in the deep darkness of that chamber, until at length the mysterious visitor was about to take his departure.

"Purvis," he said, "you have rendered me a service the extent of which you may some day comprehend. But by everything sacred do I again conjure you to treat this visit of mine as if it had never taken place! Not a syllable to your master! not a word to your fellow-servants! Remember, Purvis," continued Bertram in a tone of the deepest solemnity, "for the present I am under the ban of the law—and I need but hint at what would be my fate if through any indiscretion on your part——"

"My lord," interrupted the old man, sobbing violently, "I would not do such a thing! No, I could not—even if I did not entertain that wild hope——"

"Enough!" ejaculated Bertram; and again the steward's hand was for an instant pressed in his own.

The next moment there was the sound of a door cautiously opening and shutting: all was then silent in the chamber. Sleep presently fell upon the steward's eyes; and when he awoke in the morning, he was at a loss to conjecture whether the main incidents of the past night were a reality, or whether it were all a wild and fanciful dream.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE DUKE.

It was evening—the evening of the day which followed the incidents of the memorable night depicted in the previous chapter; and Madame Angelique was seated as usual in her elegantly furnished apartment, when the Duke of Marchmont was announced. She had little expected to see him so soon: but she rose from her seat with the conviction that she might congratulate him on his success with the oriental lady,—when she stopped short on beholding the extraordinary expression of his countenance. It was pale and careworn: there was a restless trouble in the eyes—and it was also evident that he had been drinking.

"What in heaven's name is the matter, my lord?" she asked; seized with consternation lest she herself should become involved in some dilemma with respect to the machinations which she had now no doubt had resulted in failure.

"Perdition take me, and everybody as well as everything else!" said the Duke, flinging himself upon a seat. "Give me a glass of wine. No—a tumbler! Fill it up to the brim—spare not your champagne!"

"But, my lord, do tell me," said Madame Angelique, her countenance turning so deadly pale that the rouge sate like plastered patches upon it, —"do tell me——"

"The wine, I say!" ejaculated Marchmont fiercely.

With trembling hands Madame Angelique filled a tumbler with champagne; and the Duke tossed it off at a draught.

"There!" he said, endeavouring to force himself to laugh with an air of gaiety; "now I am cheered. It is astonishing what admirable effects are produced by wine—delicious wine!"

"Pray tell me, my lord, what has occurred?"—and the infamous woman was still quivering with suspense.

"All your precious schemes resulted in no-

thing," responded Marchmont,—"or in something much worse than nothing: for my discomfiture was complete—my failure signal——perdition take it!"

"And will there be any evil consequences? does she threaten law?" demanded Madame Angelique, quickly.

"No, no—we are safe enough upon that score," rejoined the Duke.

"Then wherefore look so wild? why appear thus troubled? Your Grace has frightened me so——"

"I scarcely know what is the matter with me," answered the Duke. "I too have been frightened——But no, no—that is all nonsense on my part——In a word, I don't know what I am saying. Give me more wine!"

"Pardon me, my lord," said Madame Angelique, "but I really think you have taken enough."

"Why, you old wretch!" he exclaimed angrily: "it is wine bought with my money, I'll be bound!"

"Well, well, my lord, pray do not get out of temper:"—and she filled him a tumbler accordingly.

"This is the elixir that makes man forget his cares and drowns thought!" cried the Duke, affecting a hilarious mood—but it was a feeble and sickly endeavour. "There!" he added, "that cheers me—that inspires me!"—and yet an almost ghastly expression of care and anguish swept over his features.

Madame Angelique gazed upon him with mingled terror and astonishment. She knew not what to think. In spite of the assurance he had given her, she still laboured under the apprehension that some trouble would arise from their defeated projects in respect to Indora.

"What ails your Grace?" she asked in an agony of suspense: "there is something unnatural in all this!"

"If you said that there was something extraordinary and incomprehensible in the eastern lady's conduct, you would be right enough," responded Marchmont. "Instead of finding one who was to be easily vanquished——"

"I never told your Grace that the conquest would be an easy one," interrupted Madame Angelique. "I warned you that she was a paragon of virtue——"

"A dragon you might have said," replied Marchmont bitterly: "for when I found my way to her chamber, she brandished a dagger in my face:"—and again did an expression of ghastly horror sweep over his countenance.

"Well, my lord," said Madame Angelique, almost contemptuously, "and were you not prepared for resistance? What! you, a man, to be frightened at a dagger in the hands of a woman?"

"Perdition take you, old beldame!" vociferated the Duke fiercely: "how dare you make your insolent remarks upon my conduct?"

"I crave your Grace's pardon," cried Madame Angelique, with an air of frightened humility. "I only fancied that I had prepared your Grace sufficiently to expect some degree of resistance——"

"Silence—and listen!" interrupted the Duke sharply: then with another attempt to affect a gay and hilarious mood, he burst out into a laugh, saying, "Come, my dear madam, I was only jesting—I did not mean to offend you: but your good wine has put me into such spirits—ha! ha!" and there was sickliness and feebleness in his forced merriment.

"Well, my lord, the scheme failed—no matter how. But why—why," asked Madame Angelique urgently, "has it affected you thus?"

"There is a mystery which must be cleared up," was the Duke's response; "and *you* alone can undertake the task. Indora had some ulterior motive which you never penetrated. She is not the credulous inexperienced creature you take her for. She had some design in going to Oaklands: and what that design was, you must discover. A thousand guineas if you succeed: but if you fail, you shall never again see me cross your threshold This is plain English: do you comprehend it?"

"I do, my lord—but I am perplexed and bewildered:"—and the woman's looks justified her words. "What earthly motive could the lady have had——"

"*That*, I tell you," exclaimed the Duke passionately, "is what you must find out. While this lady was at Oaklands, she was asking a thousand questions—prying into all sorts of things—troubling herself with matters which one would have fancied to be scarcely known to her at all,—in short, Madame Angelique, she had some deep design—of *that* I am convinced!"

The infamous woman reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute; and then she said, "The only way in which I can possibly learn anything, is through the ayah Sagoonah: but as I have previously informed your Grace, she is a woman of a few words——"

"Lavish gold upon her—and it will loosen her tongue," ejaculated Marchmont. "You have brought me into all these perplexities—and it is for you to extricate me——perdition take them!"

"I really am at a loss to comprehend your Grace," said Madame Angelique, with an air of the most unfeigned surprise. "So long as this eastern lady does not threaten us with law-proceedings, or seek to punish us for anything that has taken place, what earthly reason has your lordship to apprehend that her visit to Oaklands can involve you in any peril?"

"No matter!" exclaimed the Duke: "there is something sinister in that lady's proceedings—and I cannot get it out of my mind that so far from being your dupe, she made a tool of you. Pray try and recollect the precise terms in which the subject of that visit to Oaklands was first introduced."

Madame Angelique again reflected for a brief space; and then she said, "Well, I do remember that it was of her own accord she remarked that she had heard of your beautiful seat at Oaklands and should like much to see it. I had just mentioned your Grace's name as if quite accidentally, when she made that observation——"

"It is as clear as daylight!" exclaimed the Duke angrily: "you have been outwitted—and I am the victim!"

"The victim, my lord! But how? Your Grace really makes me half inclined to think that there is something more than you suffer me to know; and unless you give me the fullest expla-

nation, it is impossible for me to fathom this mystery."

"You have got nothing to do," returned Marchmont, "but to learn that lady's motive for wishing to pay a visit to Oaklands. It was not through mere curiosity—of *that* I am well convinced. There are hundreds of beautiful country-seats; and wherefore should she thus have pitched upon mine? Besides, I tell you that I saw enough of her to convince me that so far from being inexperienced in our habits, manners, and customs, she is in every way as civilized and accomplished a woman as any English lady in the land."

"Well, my lord," said Madame Angelique, "I will lose no time in seeing what Sagoonah the ayah can do for me."

"Be it so," responded the Duke: and having quaffed another tumbler of wine, he took his departure.

On returning to his mansion in Belgrave Square, the Duke of Marchmont learnt that Mr. Armytage was waiting to see him. An expression of annoyance passed over his countenance: but he repaired to the room where Zoe's father was seated. Composing his looks in as amiable a manner as he possibly could, he gave Armytage his hand,—saying, "Well, what brings you hither at half-past ten o'clock at night?"

"I regret to say," replied Armytage, "that I am compelled to beg a boon——"

"What! another?" ejaculated the Duke, utterly unable to repress his anger and annoyance. "But of course," he added hastily, "it is not of a pecuniary character?"

"Indeed, my lord," responded Mr. Armytage, "I am sorry to say——"

"But what the deuce is coming over you, my good fellow?" exclaimed Marchmont. "You who for years were so prosperous, have of late appeared to be going altogether in the contrary direction."

"I hope and trust, my lord," responded Armytage, "that it is merely a temporary inconvenience which I am suffering——I shall put myself right shortly."

"Ah! so you told me six or seven months ago, when I lent you fifty thousand pounds—which, I need not remind you, have never been repaid."

"It is perfectly true, my lord," answered Zoe's father, growing more and more doggedly decisive in his tone: "but it is not the less certain that if I do not have twenty-five thousand pounds to-morrow by midday, I shall be a ruined man."

"Twenty-five thousand pounds, Travers!" ejaculated the Duke.

"Hush, my lord!—that name!" said Armytage hastily.

"Perdition take the name!" cried Marchmont, as if driven almost to desperation.

"And yet methinks," said Armytage coldly, "it was not altogether without your Grace's concurrence—and in some sense by your counsel—that I abandoned it."

"Well, well—but about this money which you require?" rejoined the Duke, petulantly. "It is altogether out of the question—I cannot afford it—I——"

"And I, my lord," answered the other decisively, "cannot afford to be ruined."

"But how is all this?" demanded the Duke.

"When I applied to your Grace for the fifty thousand pounds," responded Armytage, I informed you that I had suffered materially by that scoundrel Preston, who commited forgeries to such a large amount. During the past six months I have been endeavouring to retrieve my losses: but somehow or another fortune has set in steadily against me—and I have only incurred fresh ones."

"And what chance have you of improving your position?" demanded the Duke. "I thought you told me when I lent you the former amount, that you had numerous sums to receive from noblemen and gentlemen in the course of a short time?"

"And so I had, my lord," replied Mr. Armytage: "but——"

"But what? Has that money all gone likewise?"

"There is no use denying the truth," rejoined Armytage: "the fact is, I have been exceedingly unlucky—and if I do not pay this sum of twenty-five thousand into my banker's hand to-morrow to meet certain bills that will be due, I shall be a ruined man. On the other hand, if your Grace will assist me, I can immediately procure fresh pecuniary accommodation——"

"Then you will have to borrow in order to be enabled to go on?" exclaimed the Duke.

"Yes: but fortune is sure to take a turn. In a word, my lord, I am deeply interested in a splendid speculation which only requires money to float it on to complete success."

"Then you, a money-lender," cried the Duke, "are now in the hands of money-lenders?"

"It is a highly respectable solicitor who is assisting me," rejoined Armytage—"a Mr. Coleman, of Bedford Row, Holborn. The fact is, he has advanced me this twenty-five thousand pounds which I have got to pay to-morrow; and if my bills be all taken up, I can go to him with the certainty of obtaining fifty thousand."

"But out of that fifty thousand," said the Duke, "would you pay me back the twenty-five you wish me to advance?"

Armytage hesitated for a moment—and then said, "Yes, my lord—I will:" but it was in a way as if he thought to himself that if he did repay the sum he could speedily have it back again in case of need.

"I do not think, Travers, that you would deceive me——"

"Pray, my lord, be careful about that name! I don't know how it is, but of late your Grace has frequently dropped it inadvertently.

"Yes—I am afraid I have," answered the Duke, in an abstracted manner. "Well, come to me at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and you shall have the amount. But remember, it is to be repaid in the course of a few days: for if not, it would put me to a serious inconvenience. And pray, Armytage, mind what you are about—or you will ruin yourself. Do your daughter and her husband know of these difficulties?"

"Heaven forbid, my lord!" replied Armytage. "Zoe has gone abroad."

"Gone abroad?" ejaculated Marchmont. "Of course her husband has accompanied her——"

"No—she has gone alone—that is to say, with only two female servants."

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"And what is the meaning of this?" cried the Duke: "you don't intend me to understand that she is separated from her husband?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lord," returned Armytage. "Meredith was most anxious to accompany her: but she begged and implored that she might go alone. Her health has been failing for some little time past; and the physicians ordered her to visit a more genial clime. Meredith and I were compelled to let her have her own way: for if we had refused it would only have agitated her and rendered her worse. I think that she is the least thing inclined to be fanciful—not exactly hypochondriacal—but she has got it into her head that a few months' complete seclusion in the south of France or in Italy will put her completely to rights."

"Then, in that case," observed the Duke, "it was much better to let her have her own way."

"This is what I represented to Meredith," said Mr. Armytage: "but I had a great deal of trouble in persuading him to consent. He is dotingly fond of Zoe—she assures me that nothing can exceed his love for her—and she would be completely happy were it not for this nervous illness of her's."

After a little more conversation, Mr. Armytage took his leave: and when he was gone, the Duke, on examining his banker's book, experienced the most bitter vexation on finding that the cheque which he had promised to give on the morrow would considerably over-draw his account. The Duke's credit was however good; and consequently there was no difficulty in the way of his compliance with Mr. Armytage's exorbitant demand.

On the following day, at about eleven in the forenoon, Madame Angelique, apparelled in her plainest garb, proceeded to Bayswater, and walked about in the neighbourhood of the Princess's villa. She presently saw Mark, the faithful intendant or major-domo of the household, issue from the dwelling: she pretended to be walking towards the main road, with the air of a person who had a settled and legitimate object in view; and thus she watched him until he entered an omnibus. When the vehicle was out of sight, she retraced her steps towards the neighbourhood of the villa; and in a few minutes she beheld Sagoonah in the garden. Approaching the fence, she gave a peculiar cough, which at once reached the ayah's keen ear: and the latter proceeded towards a spot where, shrouded from the view of the windows of the dwelling, she could converse with Madame Angelique.

"Your mistress has returned," she said to the ayah,—"has she not?"

"Yes—she came back the day before yesterday," replied Sagoonah. "What was done?"

"Not that which we anticipated," rejoined Madame Angelique. "Your mistress possessed herself of a dagger, and so terrified the Duke that he fled away from her presence."

"Then your Duke," answered Sagoonah, her superb eyes flashing fire and her vermilion lips wreathing with ineffable scorn, "was a poor paltry coward. Why do you seek me again?" she demanded almost fiercely.

"Has the Lady Indora said nothing to you in order to account for her absence?" inquired Madame Angelique.

"Nothing," replied the ayah. "It is not probable that a great lady such as she is, would enter into familiar discourse with her slave on a subject she would of course rather avoid."

"And is it impossible for you to draw her into conversation?" inquired Madame Angelique.

"Impossible on that point, I feel convinced," answered Sagoonah. "But can you think I shall attempt to serve you further when you throw away such golden opportunities?"—and there was so sinister a light shining in the depths of her lustrous eyes, that the wily Frenchwoman was strangely struck thereby.

"Sagoonah," she said, as a suspicion arose in her mind, "I think that it was not for the sake of the gold alone you undertook to serve my purpose?"

"And wherefore do you think *that?*" asked the ayah coldly.

"Because there is a visible feeling of annoyance on your part at the failure of the enterprise. You *wished* your mistress to succumb to the Duke of Marchmont?"—and Madame Angelique fixed her eyes keenly upon the countenance of the ayah.

"Explain yourself more fully," said Sagoonah, still with a cold and unruffled demeanour.

"Perhaps you have reason to dislike your mistress?" suggested Madame Angelique; "and you therefore aided in a scheme which was to effect her ruin. In a word, you were inspired by a hope of vengeance?"

"No—not vengeance!" murmured the ayah, now all in an instant becoming profoundly agitated. "My mistress has ever been kind to me: but there is something *here*"—and she laid her hand upon her heart—"which seems to be an evil spirit prompting me to dreadful things!"

"It is as I have said," resumed Madame Angelique: "you have some bitter feeling in respect to your mistress—and therefore you aided in the hope of working her ruin?"

"Woman," replied Sagoonah fiercely, "the evil spirit has thrown you as a temptress in my way. Would that I had never seen you!—or else that your plans had been effectually carried out! For now I have all the remorse of an evil deed, without the satisfaction of knowing that it was accomplished."

"Do not reproach me," said Madame Angelique, in that voice of cajolery which she knew so well how to assume; "but let us converse reasonably together. Ah!" she ejaculated, as another suspicion struck her: "perhaps you wish to be introduced to one of those fine gentlemen of whom I have spoken to you—but you are afraid to fall unless your mistress has first set you the example?"

"Dare you think," asked Sagoonah, her eyes again flashing fire, "that impure thoughts harbour in this bosom of mine?" and with a mechanical gesture she partially drew aside the snow-white drapery from her swelling bust. "No, no!—and if for a single instant I suffered you to imagine that I was merely yielding a preference to my mistress in respect to your vile purposes, it was simply because I did not *then* choose to enter into the slightest explanation with you. But rest assured that if I were brought into the presence of any one of the fine gentlemen to whom you have alluded—and if it were for an improper purpose—I would not be content with the mere brandishing of a dagger, as you say my mistress was—but I would plunge it deep down into the villain's heart!"

As the ayah thus spoke, her eyes kept flashing continuous fires—her nostrils dilated—her bosom swelled—and she drew that bayadere form of her's up with so queen-like an air, that her whole demeanour astonished and terrified Madame Angelique.

"There is some strange mystery in all this!" thought the infamous woman to herself: and she was bewildered how to act. At length she said, "My dear Sagoonah, you treat me most singularly—most unkindly! Are we not to act together?"

"In what way?" demanded the ayah, who had all in a moment become calm and collected again. "If I still sought the ruin of my mistress, there is no means of effecting it: for the chance to which I helped you has been flung away in the most dastard manner."

"Can you not possibly ascertain the real motive which induced the Lady Indora to visit Oaklands? That is all I now require," continued Madame Angelique: "and I will lavish gold upon you if you succour me in my aim."

"Do you fancy, then," asked Sagoonah, fixing her dark eyes penetratingly upon Madame Angelique, "that the Lady Indora made use of you as an instrument to further her own views, instead of herself becoming your dupe and your victim?"

"Yes," exclaimed Madame Angelique: "that is the very opinion which the Duke of Marchmont himself expressed, and which I now hold."

Sagoonah reflected profoundly for several minutes, during which so fixed was her gaze downward—so grave and unruffled was her countenance—that Madame Angelique could not form the slightest conjecture as to what things she was revolving in her mind. At length the ayah slowly raised her head; and again fixing her looks with an earnest but unfathomable expression upon the Frenchwoman, she said, "Then the Duke of Marchmont is afraid?"

"The conduct of the Lady Indora," replied Madame Angelique, "was of a character to engender vague and mysterious apprehensions——"

"Of what?" asked Sagoonah quickly.

"I know not," responded Madame Angelique, really bewildered by the question. "Perhaps the Duke imagines that a lady visiting his country-seat under such extraordinary circumstances, and conducting herself so singularly as she did, must have some hidden motive which is full of vague and ominous portent."

"And it is!" rejoined Sagoonah: then again fixing her luminous dark eyes with a strange significancy on Madame Angelique, she added, "Rest assured that if the Duke of Marchmont do not most effectually ruin the Lady Indora, she will prove the ruin of him! Let this warning suffice:—and now I charge you that you come hither to seek me no more!"

"One word, Sagoonah—and only one word!" exclaimed Madame Angelique, terrified by the ayah's solemnly given warning: for at the moment she could think of no ruin which might overtake the Duke without involving herself at the same time; because she could not fancy that whatsoever mischief which Indora had it in her power to achieve, was in any way apart from an invocation of the law's vengeance on those who had endeavoured to beguile her to her destruction.

Sagoonah was hastily turning away when she had given utterance to her words of warning: but at that entreaty of Madame Angelique she stopped short,—saying, "What would you yet with me?"

"You have told me," responded the Frenchwoman, "that ruin will overtake the Duke if Indora herself be not ruined. In case of need, may I again rely upon your services?"

Sagoonah reflected deeply for a few instants—and then said, "To-morrow, at this same hour, I will be here."

Having thus spoken, she passed hastily away; and her white raiment was lost to Madame Angelique's view amongst the dense foliage of the garden

CHAPTER LVIII.

MR. SHADBOLT.

Between nine and ten o'clock in the evening, we shall again find the Duke of Marchmont and Madame Angelique closeted together in the luxuriously furnished sitting-room which the latter was wont to occupy. The infamous woman had explained to the Duke all which passed between herself and Sagoonah; and Marchmont was deeply agitated thereby. Madame Angelique had not as yet questioned him as to the particular cause of this trouble—for she thought that she more or less knew it, and that it concerned herself as much as him: but she presently said, "How was it that your Grace assured me last evening that we had nothing to apprehend in the shape of exposure or law-proceedings?"

"I scarcely know what I said," he answered. "You saw that I was excited and bewildered——"

"But what can she do?" demanded Madame Angelique nervously.

"If she were to lay an information before a magistrate," returned the Duke, "you would at once be arrested: and though the privilege of the peerage would save me from the same extent of ignominy that would overtake you, yet the exposure would be terrific for me likewise."

"And yet," cried Madame Angelique, as a remembrance smote her, "the ayah never told me that the Princess meditated *my* ruin! And then, too, I cannot understand why Indora should have gone prying and peering into the affairs at Oaklands, as your Grace last night informed me she had done. After all, my lord," added the woman, clinging to the hope which had thus sprung up within her, "I think that it is your Grace who somehow or another has *alone* cause for apprehension."

"You think so?" said the Duke: and a strange expression passed over his countenance. "Listen, Madame Angelique," he continued to observe, "you do not know these eastern women—it is impossible to fathom their designs. They are stealthy and treacherous as the serpents which belong to their native clime. Sagoonah's warning is not to be neglected! Rest assured that the Princess Indora is terribly vindictive——"

At this moment a domestic entered, and whispered something in the ear of Madame Angelique.

"Very good," said the woman: "I will come in a moment."

"What is it," asked the Duke, when the servant had withdrawn.

"A gentleman who has just entered the saloon from M. Bertin's house," was the response.

"Then pray get rid of your patron, whoever he is, as soon as possible," said Marchmont, in a tone of visible ill-humour: "for our conversation is of much greater moment just at present than any visits in the way of business."

"I will not be many minutes absent," responded the Frenchwoman. "It is doubtless a stranger—one of neighbour Bertin's recommendation—and I am bound to be courteous and civil towards him."

Having thus spoken, Madame Angelique issued from her private apartment, leaving the Duke by himself there; and she proceeded to that saloon which on former occasions we have described. None of the young ladies were there at the moment: but she saw that the individual who had just been introduced thither, was carefully examining the mirror-contrived door. He was handsomely dressed: but the keen experienced eye of Madame Angelique at once detected that he was not a gentleman, in the common acceptance of the term. Indeed, there was something vulgar in his appearance; and he did not seem accustomed to the elegant apparel which he had on. A suspicion of evil flashed to the mind of the infamous proprietress of the establishment: but putting on a smiling countenance, she accosted the visitor,—who had been so absorbed in examining the mirror-contrived door, that he had not in the first instance noticed her entrance from the opposite side of the room.

"You are Madame Angelique?" he said.

"I am," was the response; and she affected to smile with the utmost affability.

"Well, ma'am," rejoined the man, "and I am a detective officer."

A faint scream burst from the guilty woman's lips—and she felt as if she were about to faint: for in that announcement there was something terrible to her ears and fraught with direst apprehension to her soul.

"But do not alarm yourself," he almost immediately resumed; "for I come in quite a friendly manner."

Infinite was the relief produced by this second announcement; and Madame Angelique instantaneously began to overwhelm her visitor with attentions. She made him sit down at the table—she produced wine and other refreshments from the amply supplied side-board—and her visitor appeared well inclined to do justice to them.

"You are an amiable woman, Madame Angelique," he said, having tossed off his second bumper; "and I could not find it in my heart to hurt you. My name, ma'am, is Shadbolt. Perhaps you may have heard it before?"

"I cannot say I recollect it," answered Madame Angelique. "But do explain what brought you hither?—for I am still so agitated and excited——"

"Calm yourself, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Shadbolt: "you have no reason to be afraid. The truth is," he continued, making an inroad into a sponge-cake by means of a silver knife, and then immediately applying the same instrument to a melon, out of which he cut a huge slice,—"the truth is, ma'am, certain information has been given to the police——"

"By whom?" asked Madame Angelique eagerly; and she was trembling from head to foot.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell," replied Shadbolt. "All I know is that by some means or another an intimation was conveyed to the Commissioners of Police this very day, that your establishment was of such and such a description—of course, ma'am, I don't like to make indelicate allusions. By goles, this sherry's first-rate—and the port's stunning!"

"The Commissioners of Police!" murmured the wretched Madame Angelique: "what will become of me?"

"Nothing unpleasant, if you only listen to me," answered Mr. Shadbolt. "It was lucky for you, ma'am, that I was appointed to look into the little matter: for if it had been any other of the detectives, you would have found yourself in Queer Street, and no mistake. But I, my dear madam, am an exception to the rule: I know what gentility is—and I wouldn't think of acting harsh towards a lady of your——" he was about to say "respectability," but he thought he had better use the word "generosity"—and he substituted it accordingly.

"I cannot be too grateful to you," exclaimed Madame Angelique, to whose mind an immense relief was imparted by the praises which Mr. Shadbolt sang of himself.

"You see, ma'am," continued this individual, who was most impartially dispensing his attention to all the wines, fruits, and cakes upon the table, "the information which was sent to the Commissioners described how your neighbour, the French tailor, has a pleasant little understanding with you—and how a well-dressed person, by whispering a word in M. Bertin's ear, to the effect that he has got an appointment with a lady in your house, could at once obtain admission;—and I must do you the justice, ma'am, to observe that of all the neat, compact, and useful contrivances I ever saw, that looking-glass door beats them all into fits!"

"Good Heaven, then, the secret is known to the Commissioners?" gasped Madame Angelique.

"You ought to console yourself," replied Mr. Shadbolt, "by the reflection that it is a wonder it should have been kept a secret so long."

"And what will you do to help me? how will you serve me as a friend?" asked the Frenchwoman eagerly.

"It all depends, ma'am," was the response. "Every thing has its price. No reflections, ma'am—but you have your price for the pleasant little accommodation you furnish here; and without being more personal than is absolutely necessary, I may add that I, Isaac Shadbolt—or honest Ike, as I am generally called—have *my* price also."

"Anything,—everything, if you will only shield me!" said Madame Angelique, in a flutter of mingled hope and suspense.

"Come, ma'am—fifty guineas won't hurt you?"

"A hundred!" exclaimed Madame Angelique, her generosity becoming lavish in proportion to the amount of peril that was to be averted.

"I think I said a hundred," observed Shadbolt coolly: "but at all events we'll make it so."

Out come Madame Angelique's purse: with a nervous hand she counted down what she conceived to be five bank-notes for twenty pounds each—but one happened to be for fifty; though when Mr. Shadbolt reckoned them over with an air of easy indifference, he did not consider it necessary to draw her attention to the little oversight.

"And now, ma'am," he said, "I tell you what must be done. I shall make my report to-morrow—and it will be to the effect that though there certainly is that looking-glass door of communication, yet that you have given up the business, and you are now devoting yourself altogether to the millinery line. I shall add too that I contrived to learn that the looking-glass door is to be walled up——"

"And so it shall be!" cried Madame Angelique. "Anything—anything——"

"Don't be foolish ma'am," interrupted Mr. Shadbolt, having tossed off his ninth or tenth bumper: "you needn't do anything of the sort. Only be more careful in future—don't let that French tailor suffer a soul to pass through his house unless he knows he is all right—pay me a cool hundred every year—and you may go on driving as roaring a trade as ever."

"Then you do really think that for the present there is no danger?" said Madame Angelique.

"Not an atom of it, if you follow my advice. Honest Ike Shadbolt is not the man to deceive a lady of your respec——generosity, I mean. And now, ma'am, I'll be wishing you good night."

Mr. Shadbolt, having consigned the bank-notes to his pocket, lingered to drink one more glass of wine to the lady's health—then just one more to his own—then a last one to the highly philanthropic sentiment of "Here's better luck!" He was then advancing towards the mirror-contrived door with a somewhat unsteady pace, when Madame Angelique said, "Have you really no idea who gave the information to the police? Do you think it was a lady?"

Mr. Shadbolt had in reality no more idea than the man in the moon: but under the influence of the wine and the circumstances, he thought it necessary to appear knowing; and he therefore said, "Well, ma'am, betwixt you and me and the post, you are not very far wrong."

"Ah, I see you know more than you have chosen to tell me!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Pray be candid——"

"Well, you see, ma'am, it would not exactly do for us secret officers to tell everything we do know."

"It *was* a lady, then!" cried Madame Angelique. "Was it—was it a lady at—at—Bayswater?"

"Well, if you push me into a corner," answered Shadbolt, with a look of tipsy knowingness, "it was:"—but let the reader understand well that the fellow was in reality in entire ignorance respecting the source of that information which had been sent to the Commissioners of Police.

He took his departure; and Madame Angelique hastened back to the room where she had left the Duke of Marchmont. Although the matter had ended satisfactorily to a certain extent, and even more so than she had at first dared hope when the terrible term "detective officer" smote upon her ears,—yet she was still labouring under a considerable degree of agitation; and the Duke of Marchmont was instantaneously struck by her appearance.

"Something new?" he exclaimed petulantly. "Misfortunes never come alone: they strike us blow upon blow. But what is it?"

Madame Angelique explained everything that had taken place,—not forgetting to add how she had wormed out (as she really believed she had done) the admission from Isaac Shadbolt that it was a lady at Bayswater who had given the information to the Police Commissioners. This piece of intelligence astonished Marchmont. Indora had given him to understand, when at Oaklands, that there would be no exposure; and this assurance he had considered to include an equal exception of Madame Angelique from the wreaking of vengeance. In fact, he had not really dreaded law-proceedings or any such signs of Indora's wrath at all,—though on this evening of which we are writing, he had suffered Madame Angelique to believe the contrary, simply because he sought to work upon her fears, bend her to his purpose, and induce her to combine with him in some plot against the eastern lady. But from the intelligence he had just received, it appeared to be unquestionable that Indora was positively setting herself to work to inflict chastisement upon Madame Angelique.

"But how on earth," he exclaimed, "could Indora have obtained an insight into the mysteries of your establishment?"

"That is what puzzles and bewilders me," responded the infamous woman. "Oh! I wish—I wish I had never had anything to do with those orientals!"

"You see, my worthy friend," answered the Duke bitterly, "that we are both of us involved in the most alarming perplexities. Just now you were flattering yourself that Indora did not mean to include *you* in her vengeance——"

"She has already begun!" said Madame Angelique; "and I tremble lest it should not end there."

"End there?" exclaimed Marchmont: "it would be preposterous to indulge in such a hope. I tell you that these eastern women are as vindictive as tigresses and as cunning as serpents. We have become the objects of this vengeance and this subtlety——"

"What is to be done?" cried Madame Angelique, literally shaking herself in her mingled spite and despair.

The Duke looked her hard in the face, and said, "Did you not ask Sagoonah whether she would again serve you? did she not confess that she has some feeling, no matter what, that prompts her to yearn for the ruin of her mistress? and has she not consented to meet you in the forenoon of to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes — this is true enough," replied Madame Angelique. "But what can we do?"

"What idea had you in your head," inquired Marchmont, "when you asked if she would again assist you?"

"I had no fixed idea—I had not thought of any-

thing—I was perplexed and bewildered at the time—frightened too——"

"And yet," rejoined Marchmont, still eyeing the Frenchwoman significantly, "you did think of making *some* use of Sagoonah?"

"I see that your lordship has an idea in your head," said Madame Angelique hastily. "Tell me—what is it? I would do anything—yes, anything, anything, to rid ourselves of that enemy!"

"*Anything* did you say?" asked the Duke: and he drew his chair more closely to that which the woman occupied.

"Good heavens, how strange your Grace is looking at me!" she cried: and then in a faltering voice she added, "What—what do you mean, my lord? what would you have done? what—what would you do?"

"Indora," answered Marchmont, hovering as it were round the point to which he longed to come, but on which he dared not too abruptly seek to settle the Frenchwoman's mind,—"Indora is an obstacle or an eyesore, for some reason or another, in Sagoonah's path?"

"Yes, my lord. Well?"—and Madame Angelique held her breath half hushed.

"Well," continued the Duke—and he drew his chair closer still towards the milliner, who sate just opposite to him, "if Sagoonah were to remove that obstacle or eyesore, it were all the better for us?"

"Yes, my lord—if Sagoonah *would!*" said Madame Angelique in a low deep voice. "But——"

"But what?" asked the Duke: then after a pause, during which he gazed significantly upon the milliner, he added, "Sagoonah is to meet you to-morrow—and the slightest hint, if backed by gold——"

"Yes—a hint, my lord!" whispered Madame Angelique, at the same time that she glanced furtively to the right and left as if to assure herself that there was no listener.

"And it is for you to give this hint," replied Marchmont, slowly and deliberately accentuating his words.

Then those two—that unscrupulous aristocrat and that infamous woman,—exchanged prolonged looks of intelligence: their meaning was now beyond disguise—and if it were not, these looks would have transfused it. There was a pause of several minutes; and at length Marchmont, laying his hand upon the milliner's arm, said, "Is it to be done?"

"Yes—it is to be done," she responded: and a long-drawn breath followed that answer.

Marchmont rose from his seat—filled two glasses with wine—handed one to Madame Angelique—and tossed the contents of the other down his throat. It was as if these two unprincipled creatures were ratifying in blood-red wine the compact of blood which was settled between them!

There was a little more conversation—and then the Duke of Marchmont took his departure.

CHAPTER LIX.

SAGOONAH.

On the following day, punctual to the hour of appointment, Madame Angelique was at the spot where she was to meet Sagoonah. She was not kept many moments waiting before the ayah made her appearance; and the latter at once said, "Whatsoever you may have to tell me, be brief—for Mark is about the premises."

"Sagoonah," replied Madame Angelique, at once coming to the point—for the interview of the previous day had given her a deeper insight into the Hindoo woman's character than she had ever obtained before,—"Sagoonah, have you a particular feeling to appease or gratify, and yet dare not follow its bent?"

"What would you have me do?" asked the ayah, her dark lustrous eyes fixed searchingly upon the milliner's countenance.

"I know not what feeling inspires you towards your mistress," was Madame Angelique's quick rejoinder: "but this I do know—that if I entertained hate or jealousy in respect to another, I would not scruple to obey the impulse!"

"I told you that you were a temptress in my path," replied Sagoonah: "and it is so!"—but she lingered at the fence, and her eyes wandered slowly over the Frenchwoman's countenance, while the white drapery rose and sank with the heavings of her bosom.

"I have been told," continued the milliner, "that the Hindoo women are armed with a terrible fortitude—that they are courageous under all circumstances—that they are strong and firm, resolute and decided, in avenging the wrongs they have sustained, in appeasing the hatred excited within them, and in removing the objects of their jealousy from their path. Again I say that I know not which of all these feelings animates *you:* but very certain am I that you have all that courage—all that resolution—all that strength of purpose——"

"What words are these," said Sagoonah, in a deep voice, "which you are breathing in my ear? and wherefore do they thus sink down into those recesses of my heart where the evil spirit lurks?"

She pressed both her hands upon her left bosom as if to subdue the heavings which sprang from the agitation of the heart beneath: she moaned in spirit—she seemed to shudder with the thought that was thrilling through her brain.

"There is a way," continued Madame Angelique, protruding her head over the fence in such a manner that she could speak in a whisper almost close to Sagoonah's ear,—"there is a way by which vengeance, jealousy, or hatred may be gratified, and yet no risk run. What, for instance, if a dagger were planted in the heart of an enemy, and the right hand of that enemy were so placed as to seem as if it had just fallen from the hilt after dealing the blow? Or it might be the same with a knife——"

Indescribable was the fiend-like look which Sagoonah slowly bent upon the execrable woman who was thus tempting her,—a look in which malicious satisfaction, fierce resolution, burning

hope, and other strong feelings as well as dark passions concentrated all their power!

"Here is a heavy purse, full of golden guineas," said Madame Angelique: and she passed the purse over the fence.

If the look which Sagoonah had just bent upon her was indescribable,—equally impossible of description was the air of blended hauteur, disgust, and indignation with which Sagoonah took that purse and tossed it into the field where Madame Angelique was standing. At the same time her eyes sent forth vivid fires, and her ivory teeth glistened between the thin scarlet lips.

"No—not for a bribe!" said Sagoonah, in a voice expressive of scorn and loathing: "but for that other reason——yes, yes!"

Madame Angelique gazed upon her with a sensation of terror—a sort of feeling as if she shuddered lest the Hindoo woman was not what she seemed, but that all in an instant she might burst forth into another form, and perhaps with a savage yell spring upon her in the shape of a tigress, or in the twinkling of an eye twist the huge coils of a snake around her——so dread was the fascination, so wildly strange yet likewise awe-inspiring the expression of Sagoonah's eyes!

"Go!" said the ayah. "I do not ask why you have prompted me to this deed—nor who first of all urged you on to prompt me. Go—it shall be done: and perhaps to-morrow the intelligence will reach your ears that this house"—and she pointed towards it—"has become the scene of a fearful deed."

With these words the ayah turned abruptly away from the fence; and Madame Angelique, picking up the indignantly discarded purse, betook herself across the field towards the main road.

It was night—and Christina Ashton could not sleep. The weather was exceedingly sultry—indeed most oppressively so: she had been slightly indisposed the whole day—she was restless, uneasy, and feverish. It was twelve o'clock—and she vainly endeavoured to close her eyes. It may be easily supposed that her thoughts were actively engaged: for when are the thoughts ever more active than while the head is pressing a sleepless pillow? She knew that Zoe had taken her departure from London: a paragraph amongst the fashionable intelligence in a morning newspaper had told her this much. Too well, too well could poor Christina conjecture the cause of her amiable friend's prolonged indisposition; and bitterly, bitterly at times did she blame herself for having been more or less mixed up with that cause. And yet, as the reader knows full well, she was innocent:—the snows on the highest peaks of the Alpine mountains were not purer than Christina's thoughts!

She could not sleep: and it was twelve o'clock. Silence prevailed throughout the habitation: silence was outside too—for the air was staguant in its heaviness, and not a single leaf in the garden was ruffled. But presently that silence which reigned inside the dwelling, was broken—no, not broken—gently, and slightly, and almost imperceptibly intruded upon by the softest sound of a step upon the stair. Yet Christina heard it; and with suspended breath she listened. Again she heard it; and the thought flashed to her mind that Sagoonah was violating the pledge she had given not to descend again at night to study the huge files of the *Times*.

"This is wrong of Sagoonah," said Christina to herself: "it is doubly wrong—in the first place because no one ought to be moving about the house with a candle at this time of night—and secondly because she herself admitted that for some particular reason the Princess would be angry with her if she looked into those files."

Having thus mused to herself, Christina sate up in bed and again listened. All was profoundly silent; and with suspended breath did our young heroine continue to await the slightest, faintest sound that might next fall upon her ear. And it came: it was another footstep—so light, so airy, indeed so barely perceptible, that a doubt even lingered in Christina's mind whether she had caught it. Still she was resolved to assure herself on the point—but yet to do so in such a way that in case of being mistaken, she herself might not incur the risk of disturbing any other sleeper. It was therefore with the utmost caution she rose and opened the door—a caution so great that neither the turning of the handle nor the moving of the door upon its hinges raised a sound half so audible as the footstep she had heard.

But, Ah! as she looked forth upon the landing, she beheld a light glimmering from the Princess's chamber, the door of which evidently stood open. Now the first thought that struck her was that Indora had been seized with indisposition: and yet she heard no sounds of voices—no one moving in the chamber of her Highness. She hastened along the passage,—her naked feet raising not the slightest sound: but yet her night-dress swept for an instant against the wall—and the next moment Sagoonah issued forth from the chamber of the Princess. She had a light in one hand—and she appeared as if she had just thrust something with the other amidst the folds of her dress; for she was apparelled in her day-costume. An ejaculation was about to issue from Christina's lips—an anxious inquiry whether the Princess was indisposed?—when Sagoonah made her a vehement sign to hold her peace; and Christina was now struck by the strange expression of the ayah's countenance and the fearful light that was burning in her eyes. An unknown terror for an instant seized upon the young maiden,—transfixing, petrifying her. During this momentary interval Sagoonah noiselessly closed the door of the Princess's chamber; and then making a sign for Christina to retreat into her own, she followed her thither.

Closing the door with an unabated caution, Sagoonah placed her candle upon the drawers; and taking Christina's hand, made her sit down by her side upon an ottoman which was at the foot of the bed: for the chamber which our heroine occupied was as elegantly and as sumptuously furnished as all the rest.

"You are surprised, Miss Ashton," said Sagoonah, in a low whispering voice, but with an air of perfect calmness, contrasting strangely with the sinister expression her countenance had worn a few moments back,—"you are surprised, Miss Ashton, to have thus found me in the chamber of my mistress."

"I cannot say that I am *still* surprised," responded Christina; "because I have no doubt you

will give a satisfactory explanation. I feared that the Lady Indora was ill: but this, thank heaven, does not seem to be the case, or you would not have left her—and moreover you would have permitted me to render my assistance."

"Listen to me, Miss Ashton," continued Sagoonah. "You know that I am devoted to my beloved mistress——"

"I know that you have indeed every reason to love her," said our amiable heroine: "for I, who have only known her for a few short weeks, love her much—and you have known her from your infancy! But tell me, Sagoonah, why did you look so strange when issuing from the chamber? You terrified me."

"Listen, Miss Ashton," continued the ayah, with the calmest self-possession. "I have no doubt that with your English notions—and you call them the effects of your high civilization—you will be startled and astonished—perhaps you will even survey me with pity and contempt, when I tell you of the belief which I entertain. The conviction is firm in my mind that evil spirits walk abroad at night—and that they have not merely the power to haunt and scare those whose bedsides they visit, but likewise to wreak upon them a physical mischief. Do you comprehend me, Miss Ashton?"

We should here observe that we are not recording the precise language of which Sagoonah made use—nor do we ever when describing her discourse. She was not quite so proficient in the English tongue as to speak it with that degree of accuracy which our mode of shaping her language would appear to represent. Therefore it was not astonishing that she should ask Christina if she succeeded in making herself understood?

"Yes—I comprehend you perfectly," replied our heroine: "but I deeply regret, Sagoonah, to learn that you abandon yourself to these superstitions."

"Bear with me, my dear Miss Ashton," returned the ayah gravely: "remember that from my very infancy I was brought up in this faith——"

"And yet the Lady Indora has not the same superstitions," observed Christina mildly.

"True, Miss Ashton!" rejoined Sagoonah: "but the Lady Indora may be as wrong in rejecting them as I may be in clinging to them."

"We will not discuss the argument itself," replied Christina: "but you have yet to inform me——"

"Why I entered the bed-chamber of my mistress," added the ayah. "Can you not conjecture after all I have said?" she continued, fixing her dark eyes upon our heroine: "can you not comprehend how, loving her as I do, I often and often feel anxious on her account? To-night I could not rest——"

"You had not sought your couch, Sagoonah," interrupted Miss Ashton, glancing at the ayah's attire.

"No—because I knew full well that I could not sleep," was the Hindoo woman's response: "I had that feeling which told me how useless it would be to seek a bed on which I should only be tossing restlessly. I was full of vague terrors—I can scarcely explain them—I cannot account for them! But certain it is that under their influence I sought the chamber of my mistress to assure myself that she was safe—that no evil spirits were haunting her couch nor working her a mischief——"

"Sagoonah, Sagoonah!" exclaimed Miss Ashton, surveying the ayah with a painful suspicion,—"I know not what to think of this explanation of yours! It is hard to doubt you if the truth be issuing from your lips; and yet—and yet——"

"You do not believe me?" said the ayah, in a tone of plaintive distress. "Ah! this is indeed a source of sorrow and regret for me—because I love you, Miss Ashton — and to lose your confidence——"

Here the wily Sagoonah stopped short; and the tears trickled slowly from her lustrous eyes, glistening like diamonds upon her dark but smooth and polished cheeks. And then to the long ebon fringes of each upper lid did other tears hang quivering and sparkling; and her bosom seemed convulsed with stifling sobs—and her looks were bent so plaintively, so appealingly upon Christina, that the generous heart of the young maiden was profoundly touched.

"If for a moment I have wronged you, Sagoonah," she said, taking the ayah's hand,—"if with my English notions I have too harshly and suspiciously estimated your conduct—or rather, if I have not known how to interpret it at all, but yet have fancied that you were not truthfully nor frankly explaining it,—I beseech you to pardon me."

"Oh! now your kindness touches me even more than that transient suspicion on your part wounded me!"—and as Sagoonah thus spoke, she took Christina's hand, pressed it first to her bosom, and then carried it to her lips. "Yes, my dear Miss Ashton," she continued, "it was naught but the truth—the sincere, the honest, the genuine truth that I was telling you. I am superstitious ——can I be blamed for this weakness, if a weakness it be?"

"No, no—not blamed! But I must enlighten you, my poor Sagoonah," said the amiable heroine of our tale. "You need not apprehend that evil spirits will haunt one so good as your noble-hearted mistress. If there be evil spirits, the wicked alone have cause to tremble at them. It is not well, Sagoonah, to wander about in the dead of night as you are doing: others who know less of you than I—or rather, who understand your disposition less—would conceive that you were troubled with a guilty conscience. Night is the time when the good sleep—or at least, when they remain in their beds: and it is the season when guilt walks abroad. The fancy is irresistibly led to associate frightful and hideous deeds with midnight wanderings——"

"Miss Ashton, Miss Ashton, you terrify me!" murmured the ayah, who was indeed conscience-stricken by the words which our heroine was thus addressing to her in a tone of mild and gentle solemnity.

"There is naught to terrify you in what I say," answered Christina; "and very far from my object is it to make such an impression upon your mind. I merely wish you to comprehend that these midnight wanderings are not suitable nor becoming; and that henceforth you must exercise more strength of mind than to yield to superstitious fears. Have you not read, Sagoonah," continued

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Christina, "that night is the season for the wanderings of those who are guilty in deed or those who are equally sinful in purpose,—the season too, Sagoonah," added Christina, with a deepening impressiveness, "when Murder stalks abroad——"

"Hush, Miss Ashton—hush!" said Sagoonah, with a visible terror depicted upon her countenance. "You frighten me—you strike terror into the depths of my soul! Rest assured that I will wander about the house no more. Believe me," continued the ayah, in a tone of mingled entreaty and persuasion,—"believe me that you have made a deep impression upon me! I see that you are right—I will henceforth follow your advice in all things: but may I hope that you will keep silent as to this occurence of to-night?"

Christina reflected for a few moments: and then she said, "It will be the second time, Sagoonah, that I shall have consented to shield you from the displeasure of your mistress: but remember that it is the last! You have solemnly pledged yourself that you will not repeat these nocturnal wanderings—and I believe you. But if in this or any other way you transgress for the future, I shall feel it my duty to speak with frankness to the Lady Indora. Recollect that I eat her bread as well as you do; and I am bound to care for her interests."

"My sweet Miss Ashton," said the ayah, taking Christina's small white hand and pressing it to her lips, "you shall never again have cause to be angry with me. And now good night."

Sagoonah glided noiselessly from Christina's chamber, and ascended to her own. When there—and when she had closed the door behind her—she took from beneath the folds of her garment a long dagger with a ghastly gleaming blade and a handle of curious oriental workmanship, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. As she consigned it to her trunk, her eyes flashed sinister fires; and she murmured to herself in her own native tongue, "Fool that I was to yield even for a moment to the influence of that English girl's language. But when she spoke of Murder stalking abroad, it did indeed send a thrill through me like that of a remorse!"

The ayah sate down and reflected deeply for some minutes. There was evidently a struggle within her bosom: those better feelings which Christina's language had partially excited, were in conflict with others of a dark and deadly nature; and, alas! the latter prevailed—for at the end of her meditation, Sagoonah's splendidly handsome countenance assumed an expression of the firmest decision; and with another sinister flashing of her luminous dark eyes, she ejaculated, "Yes—it shall be done!"

Throughout the following day Madame Angelique was kept in trembling nervous suspense,—every moment expecting to hear the intelligence, from some source or another, that a frightful deed of suicide had been perpetrated during the past night in the district of Bayswater. But hour after hour passed and no such tidings came. In the afternoon the vile woman proceeded into the neighbourhood of Bayswater, and entered a shop with the air of one whose sole and legitimate object was to make some little purchase: for she thought to herself that if the deed had been really accomplished, she should be certain to hear of it there. No—not a syllable!—and the shopwoman who served her, merely remarked on the fineness of the weather, but alluded not to any incident of horrible interest. Madame Angelique returned to her house in London, and sent out for the evening papers—but still without having her frightful curiosity gratified. It was evident therefore that the deed had *not* been done. Marchmont called in the evening; and it was determined that if on the morrow the intelligence so anxiously awaited did not reach the vile woman's ears, she should repair to Bayswater and obtain another interview with Sagoonah.

It was an almost sleepless night which Madame Angelique passed: for she felt assured, considering all circumstances, that the Lady Indora was bent upon her ruin; and in order therefore that her own safety might be secured (as she fancied) it was necessary that the eastern lady should perish. She rose in the morning ill with feverish anxiety: but all the forenoon passed without the wished-for intelligence reaching her. Again, in the afternoon, she repaired to Bayswater: she entered another shop—but no unusual excitement marked the looks or the discourse of serving-men or customers: it was only too clear that the deed still remained undone.

Madame Angelique proceeded into the neighbourhood of the Princess Indora's villa; and she watched until she saw Mark, the faithful major-domo, issue forth from the premises. Then, so soon as he was out of sight, she hastened towards the fence; and in a few minutes Sagoonah made her appearance.

"I thought you would have come yesterday," said the ayah, immediately upon reaching the fence. "I fancied that you would be only too anxious to learn whether it was done—and if not, why it was left undone."

"My dear Sagoonah," answered Madame Angelique, quivering with suspense, "I felt so certain that your courage would not fail you—I was so convinced that you were endowed with such an indomitable fortitude——"

"Cease these idle flatteries!" interrupted the ayah with impatience. "I have but a minute to tarry here. Listen! There is an English girl beneath this roof——"

"I know it," said Madame Angelique: "Christina Ashton!"

"And so long as that girl is here," continued Sagoonah, with rapid utterance, "my arm is paralyzed. I need say no more. It is not in my power to devise or execute any scheme to get rid of her: this must be a task for you to undertake and to accomplish."

"But how?" exclaimed Madame Angelique, stricken aghast by the announcement. "It may take days and days to put some stratagem into execution——"

"If you, then, are so deficient in means for a small undertaking," interrupted Sagoonah coldly, "how can you possibly fancy that I shall incur every risk and make every sacrifice for a great undertaking? Understand me well! Rid me of that girl, and the deed shall be done: but so long as she remains there, I will not make another effort towards its accomplishment."

Having thus spoken, Sagoonah turned abruptly

away. Madame Angelique called after her: but she would not stop—neither did she even look back. She seemed as if she heard not the vile woman's words; and her tall bayadere form, clothed in its white drapery, was speedily lost amidst the trees to the view of Madame Angelique.

CHAPTER LX.

MR. SYCAMORE.

While this scene was passing between three or four o'clock in the afternoon at Bayswater, Christian Ashton was pursuing his way along Piccadilly. In a few minutes he entered a fashionable hotel, and inquired of the waiter if the Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore was within? The response was in the affirmative; and our young hero was conducted up-stairs to an apartment where the object of his visit lay stretched upon the sofa smoking a cigar.

Nothing could exceed the freedom and ease or the luxurious languor of that state of abandonment which characterised Mr. Talbot Sycamore's posture. His head reposed upon the cushion at one end of the sofa—his feet reclined upon the high part of the sofa at the other extremity: one morocco-slipper had fallen off—the other just hung on to the tips of his toes. His elegant flowered-silk dressing-gown was all flowing open; and he inhaled the fragrance of his cigar with the comfort of one who appeared not to have a single care in the whole world.

The Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore was a little past thirty years of age. He had auburn hair, which he wore very long, and which seemed to curl naturally—large whiskers of a somewhat redder tint—blue eyes—and a tolerable good-looking countenance. He was tall, slender, and well made—but had a rakish, dissipated, devil-may-care appearance, which was visible enough even beneath that easy fashionable languor that now as it were invested him. The waiter withdrew; and Christian remained alone with this gentleman.

Mr. Sycamore, taking his cigar from his mouth, waved it with a sort of graceful negligence in the direction of a chair,—at the same time suffering a long whiff of smoke to exhale slowly from his lips. Our hero took the chair, and said, "I have called, sir, in consequence of the letter which I received from you by this morning's post."

"Ah, I see," observed Mr. Sycamore, speaking with that sort of drawing-room drawl which impresses on with the idea that it requires a very great effort indeed to make use of that faculty of speech which is one of the main distinctions between its possessor and the lower animals. "You are the young man who advertised for the post of private secretary, with all sorts of qualifications?"

"And you, sir, I presume," answered Christian, "are the gentleman who wrote to inform me that you required precisely such an assistant as I announced myself to be."

Mr. Sycamore slowly turned himself half round upon the sofa, and gave a good long stare at our young hero, whose speech he evidently fancied had a sort of covert irony or rebuke in it. And such was indeed the case: for Christian, though perfectly free from undue pride, was somewhat incensed at being called "a young man;" and the term "all sorts of qualifications" had struck him as being more or less supercilious. He however endured the staring process with a becoming composure,—firmly without hardihood, and with a suitable dignity that was devoid of disrespect as it was totally apart from insolence.

"Well, it is perfectly true," resumed the Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore, "that I am in want of a private secretary. You see, I am a man of large acquaintance—but select, Mr. Ashton—all select. Damme, nothing vulgar! Dukes, Marquises, Earls, and those sort of people—these are my friends. Now, this acquaintance—so extensive and yet so choice—involves me in a devil's own mass of correspondence—and it's more than I can manage for myself. That's why I require a secretary," he lazily added.

Christian remarked that he considered that there was nothing very onerous or difficult in the duties which he would have to fulfil;—and we may observe that he was too anxious to obtain another situation to suffer himself to be disheartened or disgusted by any peculiarities in Mr. Sycamore's conversation or manners.

"You have no objection to travel?" resumed this gentleman: "I don't mean travelling all over the world—but simply on a trip to Brighton, or Cheltenham, or Ramsgate, or Dover, just as the fancy takes me. You see, I am a bachelor, and have to kill time to the best of my ability."

Christian assured Mr. Sycamore that he had no objection to accompany him on such little journeys as those to which he had alluded.

"You will see the world and amuse yourself," continued Mr. Sycamore; "and I have no doubt your place will be an easy and agreeable one. At all events I can tell you *this*—you will never see any low people visiting me. I never in my life spoke to a person that did not keep his carriage. If any friend of mine puts down his carriage for the sake of economy,—damme, I cut him instantly! So now you see what sort of a person I am."

Christian did see it, and with infinite disgust too: but he was careful not to betray what he felt—for it was not his business to quarrel with Mr. Sycamore's peculiar fastidiousness, nor was it his interest to throw away the chance of obtaining a good situation simply because he had to do with a coxcomb or a boaster. Mr. Sycamore continued to talk in the same style for another quarter of an hour; and then he asked for testimonials. Christian produced those which he had received from the Duke of Marchmont and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha,—wherewith Mr. Sycamore was pleased to express his satisfaction,—observing that they were at least not "low people," and that he had no doubt Christian would suit him very well.

"I am going out of town the first thing to-morrow morning," said Mr. Sycamore; "and you must accompany me. You had therefore better be here as soon after breakfast as you can."

"I will be here, sir," answered Christian, with ingenuous readiness, "at nine o'clock—or earlier, if you wish it."

Mr. Sycamore gave a sort of despairing groan—and then surveyed our hero with wonderment and dismay. Christian saw that he had said or done something that was most outrageous: but for the life of him he could not conjecture what it was.

"At nine o'clock in the morning?" at length said Mr. Sycamore in a faint voice, as if his nerves had been dreadfully shocked. "What I call the first thing in the morning, is about half-an-hour past noon. Pray don't entertain such low ideas as to confound night with morning. It's all very well for people who have to get up to black boots, or take down shutters, or open their shops: but a gentleman's morning," continued Mr. Sycamore, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "begins a little after noon-day—and it is just allowable for him to begin his breakfast at one o'clock. So if you are here at half-past two to-morrow, it will be a very convenient hour in the morning indeed. You will of course come with your luggage, as we shall start off at once for Ramsgate—which I am told is getting rather a fashionable place since I began to patronize it last year."

Christian promised to be punctual at half-past two on the following day; and he issued forth from Mr. Sycamore's presence. Descending the stairs, he was passing through the hall of the hotel, when he perceived a very handsomely-dressed groom,—who was a nice-looking dapper little man of about five-and-twenty, but bow-legged, as indeed all approved and veritable grooms ought to be,—engaged in some little altercation with another man who had the air as well as the odour of a hostler from a livery-stable.

"Now, look you, Jeames," said the hostler to the dapper groom, "it's no use talking. My guvner says as how the cab sha'n't be sent never no more unless the bill's paid, or a good reference gived. You and me, Jeames, know what's what—and it *is* rayther hard that your guvner should run up a tick of forty-five pound for the hire of a cab and never so much as pay a scurrick on account. It isn't the cheese, Jeames—no, blow me tight if it is!"

"Nonsense, Tom!—it's all right," answered the dapper groom, whose christian name appeared to be James. "My master's a gentleman of fortune, which has his own peculiar ways——"

Christian heard no more: indeed he had not purposely lingered to catch any of the conversation at all: but he could not help overhearing the little which we have recorded, as he passed through the hall. He thought nothing of it at the time; and it speedily slipped out of his memory. He was glad that he had obtained a new situation; and he at once set off to Bayswater, to communicate the circumstance to his sister,—who he well knew would be delighted with the intelligence. He found Christina at home; and when it was announced to the Princess that he was to leave London on the morrow, she bade him remain and pass the evening with Christina.

At half-past two o'clock on the following day, Christian alighted from a cab at the door of the hotel in Piccadilly; and his boxes were deposited in the hall. He inquired of the waiter for Mr. Sycamore; and at the same instant the dapper-looking groom stepped forward, inquiring, "Are you Mr. Ashton?"

"Yes," answered Christian: and an unpleasant suspicion at once smote him.

"Master will be ready in half-an-hour," rejoined James: "he was up rather late this morning. If you will step into the coffee-room, Mr. Ashton, you can sit there till we are ready to start."

Our hero followed this recommendation; and as there happened to be no one else in the coffee-room at the time, he thought he should like to have a few minutes' conversation with one of the waiters. He did not exactly admire the discovery he had just made—that his new employer was the master of the dapper groom, and consequently the object of the somewhat peculiar discourse he had overheard on the previous day between the dapper groom aforesaid and the hostler from the livery-stable. If there were anything at all suspicious in respect to Mr. Sycamore's character, it was not too late for our hero to resign the situation he had accepted: for he assuredly had no inclination to go travelling about in the service of one who contracted debts without the means of paying them. He accordingly rang the bell, so that under the pretext of ordering some little refreshment, he might draw the waiter into discourse.

"Ah, sir—I see, sir," said this individual, when a few remarks had been exchanged, "you are the young gentleman who has taken the situation of private secretary to Mr. Sycamore?"—and then with a great show of tidiness, he briskly wiped away some imaginary crumbs from an adjacent table.

"I suppose Mr. Sycamore is highly respectable and very well off?" observed Christian inquiringly.

"He has paid all his bills, sir, this morning," responded the waiter; "and so there is no complaint to make. All gentlemen as pays their bills, is respectable, sir:"—and the waiter affected to be exceedingly busy in conveying the Supplement of the *Times* from one table to another, and then bringing it back to the place whence he had removed it.

Christian saw by these little manœuvres that the waiter purposely lingered with a view of being drawn into conversation, but that he did not like to speak too fast, nor too confidentially in the first instance.

"What have I to pay?" asked our hero, taking out his purse.

"Pay, sir? Tell you directly, sir. Sandwiches, one-and-six—half-pint of sherry, one-and-three:—two-and-nine, if you please, sir."

Christian handed the waiter five shillings, whereupon that functionary instantaneously began to fumble in his breeches' pocket, holding himself much on one side as he did so—and delaying as long as he could to produce the change, because he more than half suspected that he was to keep the balance for himself. And this was what Christian did mean: for he saw plainly enough that the waiter required to be lured rather than drawn into confidential discourse.

"Keep that for yourself," said Christian.

"*Very* much obliged to you, sir," answered the waiter with a bow: and having with his napkin brushed away a few more imaginary crumbs from the corner of the table, and moved the mustard-pot to the other side of the salt-sellar, he said, "I think you *may* find Mr. Sycamore an agreeable gentleman enough: but he is very fast and very racketty."

"He has a great many visitors, has he not?" inquired Christian.

"Yes, sir—a great many," answered the waiter: then after a pause, he added, "But he is always denied to them, sir—always."

"Denied to them?" ejaculated our hero, in amazement.

"Oh, yes, sir! Tailors—bootmakers—jewellers—livery-stable-keepers—in fact, sir," added the waiter, with a significant look, "Mr. Sycamore is very high and mighty indeed, and does not like low people:" having said which, the waiter again stared in a meaning manner upon Christian's countenance.

"Do you intend me to understand," demanded our hero, "that Mr. Sycamore is not a respectable person? You can speak frankly——I do not ask through impertinent curiosity—and I shall not repeat anything you may tell me."

"Well, sir," said the waiter, "I'll tell you exactly all I know of Mr. Sycamore. He has been three months at the hotel—and he never paid his bill till to-day. He gets up at about noon, and comes home to bed at three or four in the morning. He hired a cabriolet from the livery-stables, and never paid for that till this morning. But all his bills he *has* settled; and now you know as much of him as I do."

"He keeps one servant, I suppose?" said Christian.

"Yes—the groom that you have seen, sir:"—and then, after glancing towards the door and looking out of the window, the waiter added, "And that groom, sir, is as downy a little fellow as ever you could wish to see in a day's walk."

"I do not precisely comprehend you," remarked Christian.

"Why, sir, I mean that he is up to all sorts of snuffs, and down to all kinds of dodges. He knows a thing or two: he is as artful a cove as here and there one. He gets up uncommon early in the morning: no one gets up earlier. He is wide-awake, and can't be done."

At this moment a couple of gentlemen entered the coffee-room to take some refreshments: and Christian's discourse with the waiter ended abruptly. Our young hero did not altogether like the character he had heard of Mr. Sycamore: but as for that of the groom James, it had been explained to him in so figurative a manner, with so many rhetorical flourishes and allegorical illustrations, that he knew not precisely how to estimate it.

"After all," said Christian to himself, "I have heard nothing actually or substantially prejudicial to Mr. Sycamore. He has paid his debts at last, and will leave the hotel in an honourable manner. Perhaps it is one of his peculiarities to keep his creditors waiting and pay them in a mass. It may be that he considers them a set of 'low people,' and likes to show his contempt for them. At all events, I had better keep to my engagement: it will be easy for me to throw it up if it do not please me."

Scarcely had our young hero arrived at this conclusion, when James entered to inform him that Mr. Sycamore was ready to start. A couple of cabs were at the door, as Christian's new employer travelled with a considerable quantity of luggage. That gentleman entered one of the vehicles, to the box of which James ascended; and Christian followed in the other. They proceeded to the railway-station at London Bridge,—where the Hon. Talbot Sycamore took a first-class ticket for himself, a second-class one for Christian, and a third-class ticket for James. The train was just ready to start; and they proceeded to occupy their seats according to the classification just described.

In the compartment to which Christian Ashton was assigned, there were only two passengers in addition to himself. One was an elderly man, who settled himself in the corner to take a nap,—most probably for the purpose of sleeping off the liquor of which he had evidently been partaking rather freely, and the fumes of which hovered around him, giving to the compartment the savour of a wine-vaults. The other passenger was a female very neatly dressed, and with a veil drawn over her countenance. Opposite to this female did Christian happen to place himself; and it occurred to him that she gave a slight start, and even uttered a low ejaculation, as he entered the carriage. He could not very easily distinguish her countenance through the veil: but yet he saw enough of it to convince him that it was not altogether unfamiliar. He did not however like to regard her too earnestly,—especially as she seemed to hang down her head as if in annoyance or confusion that he had even looked at her as attentively as he had done.

The train rolled out of the station: the intoxicated gentleman in the corner soon began to convince his fellow-passengers, by certain nasal sounds, that he was wrapped in the arms of Morpheus; and then the female, slowly leaning forward, said, "How do you do, Mr. Ashton?"

At the same time she raised her veil: and our hero at once recognised Amy Sutton,—who, as the reader will recollect, was one of the Duchess of Marchmont's lady's-maids. We may also, perhaps, remind the reader that it was she of whom the unprincipled Duke to a certain extent made use when engaged in his vile plot against his wife. She was now in her twenty-fifth year: we have already described her as tall and handsome, but with a look displaying a resolute decisiveness of character, and which could at times merge into a savage fierceness. She was selfish—worldly-minded—and avaricious. At the time when Christian knew her, her character was unimpeachable; for her pride rather than her principle had prevented her from stooping to any underhand or immoral means to augment the sum of her hoarded gold. It was this same Amy Sutton who now made herself known to Christina in the railway train, as above described.

After the exchange of a few observations, he inquired whether she was still in the Duchess of Marchmont's service?

"No," she answered: and her look became all in an instant strangely gloomy.

Christian now observed that she was altered since he had last seen her many months back: she was pale, and her countenance was somewhat thin and careworn. He did not like to continue questioning her; for he found that his first query had somehow or another given her pain. There was a silence of a few minutes, during which he felt awk-

ward; and she looked down in sinister, moody pensiveness. At length that silence was broken by herself; for suddenly raising her eyes, and glancing towards the tipsy individual to assure herself that he was still slumbering, she leant forward, and said in a deep voice, "The Duke of Marchmont is the greatest villain upon earth!"

"You and I saw enough of him, Amy," responded Christian, "to be enabled to arrive at no very favourable conclusion with respect to his character."

"You know full well, Mr. Ashton," she rejoined, "that I was completely innocent of any wilful complicity in that scandalous plot——"

"I know it, Amy," answered our hero. "You were deceived by appearances: those dresses which were worn by another——"

"Yes, I was indeed deceived!" resumed Amy Sutton. "Never was deception more gross—more abominable!"

"I hope that the Duchess did not believe you guilty, and visit you with her displeasure?" said Christian.

"Oh, no! the Duchess of Marchmont treated me most kindly. Indeed, I have remained in her service until about a fortnight ago:"—then, after another brief pause, she added in a low deep voice, "That miscreant Marchmont has been my—my—ruin!"

Christian gazed upon her in astonishment. Such words coming from female lips, naturally conveyed the impression of seduction's triumph: and our hero was surprised for more reasons than one. He had always heard Amy Sutton spoken of as a young woman of unimpeachable virtue, and who indeed would fiercely resent the slightest liberty that was taken with her. Moreover, he had believed that she had detested the Duke on account of that iniquitous affair of which they had been speaking. How, then, was it that her virtue had succumbed? How had her aversion been changed into love?

"Do not think, Mr. Ashton," she presently resumed, "that I have been wilfully and wantonly frail. If that were the case, I should not be addressing you in such a manner. No—with shame should I do my best to conceal my fault! Can you not understand me? I was the victim of the most diabolical atrocity—and I will be signally revenged!"

Christian was more and more astonished at what he heard: but it was a point on which he would not ask questions: he could only listen to just so much as Amy Sutton might choose to reveal to him.

"Perhaps you consider it indelicate," she went on to say, "that I should make such a revelation to one of the opposite sex. But it is because you already know so much of the villany of Marchmont's character—and because we were both as it were mixed up in a transaction which so signally exposed his baseness and his turpitude—and perhaps, too, it is a relief to my goaded feelings to be enabled to speak of my wrongs to one who knows their author so well, and knows likewise how fully capable he is of inflicting any wrong, even the worst and most flagrant that one fellow-creature can sustain at the hands of another. It was shortly after the return of the family from Oaklands to Belgrave Square—he made an overture to me—I rejected it with scorn and indignation—he repeated it—he displayed gold before my eyes—and still I rejected his advances with abhorrence. I threatened to leave my situation the very next day, and to explain to the Duchess wherefore I left——"

Amy Sutton paused for a minute: her countenance was perfectly livid with the workings of her feelings and the deep sense of her wrongs.

"That same night," she continued, in a voice so low that it was barely audible, and after having flung another glance towards the slumberer in the corner,—"that very night I was awakened from my sleep by the sensation of something poured between my lips: but between that awakening and a sinking into a state of perfect unconsciousness, there was only a moment's interval—so that it appears like a dream when I think of it! When I awoke in the morning"—and here Amy Sutton lowered the veil over her countenance,—"when I awoke in the morning, the Duke was with me—my ruin——"

The remainder of the sentence was lost in a low, deep, stifling sob. Christian sate aghast at this narrative of diabolic villany. Bad as he knew the Duke of Marchmont to be, yet he could scarcely have fancied that he was capable of such hideous turpitude as this. Amy Sutton sate back in the railway carriage with her veil over her countenance; and in this posture she remained, completely immoveable, for nearly ten minutes,—all her senses and faculties being absorbed in the contemplation of the tremendous wrong which she had sustained and of the vengeance that she purposed to wreak whenever the opportunity should serve.

"Perhaps you will ask me," she at length resumed,—"or at all events you will wonder, why I did not drag the Duke of Marchmont before the tribunals and punish him for his flagrant iniquity? But if I had adopted that course, it would have been likewise to expose my own disgrace—to parade my own dishonour; and I am dependent on my character for my bread. The world might have sympathised with me perhaps; but amongst all those sympathisers, who would give me another situation? who would have received me into his home to attend upon his virtuous wife or his chaste daughters? And then, too, Mr. Ashton," continued Amy, "there was another consideration—a consideration suggested by the language which the Duke himself held to me when I reproached and threatened him for the atrocity of his conduct. It was that against my accusation he would reply that he had been invited to my bed—or at least that I had willingly received him there—and that I subsequently proclaimed a foul charge against him because he would not yield to the exorbitance of my demands for pecuniary reparation."

"And after that, Amy," said Christian, "you remained for several months in the service of the Duchess?"

"Yes," she replied—and then remained silent, offering no explanation of this portion of her conduct: nor did Christian like to ask for any.

There was a farther pause, which was broken by our hero inquiring whether Amy Sutton was going all the way to Ramsgate?

"I am not," she answered. "My destination is a small village a little way on this side of Ashford."

She said no more; and there was another long pause. The tipsy individual in the corner now woke up; and having slept off the fumes of his former potations, he appeared to think it was necessary to renew them. He accordingly drew forth a case-bottle from his pocket; and taking out the cork, applied it first to his nose to inhale the smell, and next to his lips to imbibe the liquor. Having taken a deep draught, he wiped the mouth of the bottle with his sleeve, and proffered it to Amy, who declined it with disgust—then to Christian, who refused it with cold civility.

"Well, then," said the drunken gentleman, "there is all the more for me:"—and he forthwith proceeded to empty the bottle.

He then observed, for the behoof of his listeners, that he could replenish it at Ashford—but that he wished he had done so at Reigate, where the brandy was better: and then it occurred to him that there was very good rum to be got at the Ashford station—and he thought it might agree with him best. He next noticed that the crops looked very fine: though how he could manage to see them at all, was a perfect miracle, inasmuch as he had one eye closed and the other blinking like an owl's. So, having delivered himself of the sage observations just recorded, he fell into the corner and into a sound sleep simultaneously.

In about half-an-hour the train stopped at Headcorn; and there Amy Sutton took leave of Christian Ashton—for she had reached her destination. At Ashford the intoxicated gentleman woke up, and contrived to alight for the purpose of replenishing his flask. When he had returned to his seat, he applied himself with much industry to the said flask,—the effects of which, instead of making him sleepy, rendered him quarrelsome: so that, to Christian's surprise and astonishment, he began to pull off his coat, hiccoughing out an expression of his deep regret at the necessity under which he laboured of polishing our hero off. For this polishing purpose he rose up from his seat; but Christian, in order to put an end to these pugnacious displays, forced him back into it again, with the assurance that if they did come to a fight it would be much the worse for him who provoked it. Fortunately the city of Cauterbury was soon reached; and there the drunken gentleman was claimed by his wife and three grown-up daughters, who were waiting to receive him, and who assailed him in no measured terms on beholding the condition in which he had brought himself back to the bosom of his family.

Ramsgate was reached in due time; and the Hon. Talbot Sycamore took up his quarters at the Royal Hotel.

CHAPTER LXI.

CHRISTIAN'S NEW EMPLOYER.

WHETHER it were under the bracing influence of the sea-air—or whether it were because even the most fashionable people keep more natural hours when at watering-places,—we cannot take it upon ourselves to decide: but certain it was that the Hon. Talbot Sycamore did actually and positively leave his couch at nine in the morning after his arrival, and did with an equal degree of certitude sit down to breakfast at half-past nine when he had taken a short lounge upon the sands in his flowered silk dressing-gown, his morocco slippers, and a red cap with a gold tassel very much resembling a Turkish fez.

While still at breakfast, he somewhat sententiously inquired of the waiter whether his private secretary had partaken of *his* breakfast?—and on receiving an answer in the affirmative, he desired that Mr. Christian Ashton might be requested to walk up. Our hero accordingly repaired to Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room; and that gentleman said, "If you place yourself at the side-table near the window, you can write a few letters to my dictation—and during the intervals when I am wearied of talking, you can gaze out upon the harbour and the sea."

This last recommendation might have been very considerate indeed if it were not somewhat puerile; and while Mr. Sycamore went on discussing his muffin, his egg, and his ham, Christian arranged the writing-materials at the side-table. The waiter entered the room with a hot muffin; and Mr. Sycamore said, with an air of easy indifference, "The first letter, Mr. Ashton, is to my London bankers. Just put the address and date—don't write the word 'Gentlemen'—but put 'My dear sirs', as I am devilish intimate with them. Waiter, some more cream."

While the waiter was absent, Mr. Sycamore remained silent; and Christian certainly thought it was rather a singular coincidence that he should only begin dictating again when the waiter reappeared. Yet such was the fact.

"Write thus," said Mr. Sycamore: "'I will thank you to remit to the Ramsgate banker five thousand pounds to my account. With regard to that sum of twenty thousand which Lord Toddington paid into your hands on my behalf the other day'——"

But here Mr. Sycamore stopped short, as the door had just closed behind the waiter. It might have been that he had dictated enough at a stretch for one of his languid temperament: but it certainly appeared to Christian very much as if he desisted then and there simply because the individual for whose behoof he was thus parading his financial concerns was no longer present. However, after a little while the letter was concluded with some special instructions as to the laying-out of the twenty thousand pounds paid in by Lord Toddington; and by the time it was finished, the waiter entered to clear away the breakfast-things.

"Now, Mr. Ashton," said the Hon. Talbot Sycamore, "we must write a letter to my friend, the Duke of Arlington. Put the place and date; and then begin 'My dear Arlington.' Now go on to say—'Here I am installed in devilish comfortable quarters at Ramsgate. Do you mean, my dear fellow, to fulfil your promise of joining me here for six weeks? If so, let me know by return of post; as the place is most disgustingly crowded, and I must bespeak rooms for you at the hotel three or four days beforehand. Tell Lord Toddington that I find I have lost my wager of five thousand guineas, and shall send him up a cheque by this same post. He paid me twenty

thousand the other day; so it is a devilish good sweep for him to get back a quarter of it in so short a time. By the bye, tell Toddington likewise that I will give him eight hundred for that black mare of his' ——"

Here there was another stopping-short; and Mr. Sycamore, throwing himself back in his chair, yawned considerably: but Christian could not help noticing that the waiter had left the room a few instants before the task of dictation was thus suspended. He shortly returned to finish clearing away the table; and the instant his steps were heard upon the landing outside, the dictation was renewed. We will not, however, inflict any more of it upon our readers: suffice it to say that the remainder of the letter to the Duke of Arlington was in the same familiar style as its commencement: so that to disbelieve the fact that the Hon. Talbot Sycamore was the very dear and intimate friend of his Grace of Arlington, would have been tantamount to the guilt of a supposition that the said Hon. Talbot Sycamore was dictating a tissue of falsehoods either for purposes of vain-glory, or for others still less innocent.

Several more letters were dictated to noblemen and baronets; and thence it was to be inferred that Mr. Sycamore did indeed enjoy a very select and honourable acquaintance amidst the titled aristocracy of the three kingdoms. When the letters were all finished, Mr. Sycamore affixed his signature thereto: they were duly folded—placed in envelopes—addressed—and sealed with the Hon. Talbot Sycamore's armorial bearings, which consisted of a griffin with three heads and such other little curious conceptions as the wisdom of the Heralds' College or the genius of some imaginative seal-engraver had succeeded in producing.

"Shall I take these letters to the post?" inquired Christian, when the morning's task was over.

"Yes—you may," replied Mr. Sycamore, in his wonted languid indifferent manner: but just as Christian was about to leave the room, he said, "No! on second thoughts I'll take them myself. I shall be passing that way in my rambles; and I have got an inquiry to make about a letter which ought to have reached me here."

Christian issued from the hotel to take a walk; and he naturally reflected on all that had been done in reference to the letter-writing. He had certain misgivings in his mind: but yet he dared not allow them to obtain an immediate ascendancy over him. It looked very much as if the Hon. Mr. Sycamore had dictated in a particular sense, in order to impress the hotel-waiter with a grand idea of his finances, his acquaintances, and his general respectability, so that the hotel functionary might go and report everything to the landlord:—but, on the other hand, it might all be correct, legitimate, and straightforward enough, and nothing more reprehensible in the gentleman's mode of procedure than a love of ostentation and prideful display. At all events, Christian was resolved not to be too ready to jump at a conclusion, nor stand the chance of doing his employer an injustice by a rash and precipitate formation of opinion.

He repaired to the sands where the visitors were bathing: and at first he stood looking on, amidst other spectators, with a feeling of cheerfulness and a sense of exhilarating amusement. But by degrees our hero began to conceive strange notions respecting the delicacy of all that he saw before him. There were male bathers in a condition of perfect nudity within five or six yards of female bathers, who certainly were enveloped in long gowns, but they were so loose that they came open at the breast with every ripple of the sea and with every movement of the form. Then, too, the gentlemen were swimming about in all directions, performing a thousand evolutions *on* the water as well as in it,—floating on their stomachs and their backs—leaping high to dive down head foremost—or ascending the steps at the back of the machines in order to plunge off into the sea again. Then on the shore, too, Christian could not help observing that the ladies rambled or stood nearest to those points where the gentlemen were bathing. Some sate upon the sands pretending to be deeply absorbed in the novels which they held in their hands: but the pages were only turned at very long intervals, and the eyes which should have been bent upon them, were peering over at the flandering, swimming, leaping, diving, antic-playing gentlemen-bathers.

But if the ladies thus congregated near the places were those of the opposite sex were frolicking in the water, the gentlemen-spectators on the other hand seemed as if by accident—Oh, yes! quite by accident—to be lounging individually or collectively in little groups nearest to where the fair sex, like so many draped nereids, were disporting in the sun-lit sea. Many a fair bosom thus unveiled its beauties to the libertine regards devouringly fixed upon them:—glimpses of white glancing limbs were likewise caught as the fair bathers practised swimming by the aid of the guides, or as they ascended the steps of the machines on emerging from the water. Hoary old men riveted their gloating looks upon those charming bathers; and some even went so far or were so carried away by their libidinous feelings, as to raise their eye-glasses all the better to catch and devour the glimpses of those charms which were being continuously revealed to them. And the ladies knew full well that they were thus the objects of such earnest contemplation on the part of the gentlemen-spectators: but they exhibited no indignation—no blush of shame rose to their cheeks—no voice of offended modesty appealed to the guides to request that the insolent beholders might be desired to stand back.

As the consciousness that all these disgusting and scandalous indelicacies were being enacted before him, gradually dawned into the mind of Christian Ashton, he at first felt astonished: he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. Yet it was indeed but too true!—for there, in the broad daylight, with the sun's refulgence blazing upon the entire scene, was all this going on. Very fortunate was it for the proprietors of the machines that their bathers belonged to the well-to-do orders, numbering amongst them persons of rank, standing, and wealth. Oh! if those bathers had only belonged to the poorer classes, how the saints would have held up their hands and turned up the whites of their eyes! what tirades would have been heard from the pulpits of churches and from within the walls of

the Houses of Parliament! what fulminations and lamentations would there have been in respect to the immorality and profligacy of the working classes! Magistrates would have come down armed with all the powers of the law to prevent bathing altogether, and to plunge into ruin the owners of the machines: bishops and other legislators would have clamoured for additional legal enactments; and Exeter Hall would have echoed to the snivellings, the whinings, and the lugubrious lamentations of the "godly." Such would have been the case if those bathers belonged to the working class: but they formed a portion of the higher orders—those orders who are not merely privileged in respect to all political rights, but likewise privileged to enjoy all immoralities with the fullest impunity.

That feeling on Christian's part which had commenced with amazement and had progressed into incredulity as to the evidence of his own senses, terminated in disgust. He retired from the scene, and rambled through the town, marvelling that ladies and gentlemen of education, and who arrogate to themselves the credit of being the depositaries of all that is best in refinement, delicacy, and virtuous principle in this country, should thus scandalously forget themselves—or rather wilfully act in a manner that gave the lie to all their presumptuous boastings.

Several days passed: and every morning Christian was employed for about an hour-and-a-half in writing letters to Mr. Sycamore's dictation. These were to a variety of noblemen and gentlemen of position and wealth, and were couched in different degrees of intimacy and familiarity. Mr. Sycamore generally took them for the purpose of posting them himself: or else he gave them to his man James with the command to do so. Letters arrived from London in response to these: and Christian could not help thinking that Mr.

Sycamore was very negligent in allowing his correspondence to lie about on the table in his sitting-room.

Mr. Sycamore hired horses and equipages, and lived altogether in the style of a man of fortune. He picked up acquaintances—if he had not previously formed them—at Ramsgate: a lord or two dined with him—two or three baronets joined him at champagne breakfasts—he received invitations to parties—and by the time ten days had expired, he was the perfect star of the place. He seemed determined likewise that the tradespeople of Ramsgate should benefit by his presence: for, as he observed to Christian, "What was the use of having money unless to diffuse it fairly and do good with it?"

Acting upon this admirable principle, the Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore was lavish in his orders. The jewellers, the tailors, the boot-makers, the perfumers, and the livery stable-keepers were speedily honoured with his patronage. But so far as the liberality of his custom went, the landlord of the Royal Hotel had no reason to complain: for the handsomest suite of apartments was retained by Mr. Sycamore—the costliest wines were daily put in ice for his table—the markets of Ramsgate did not furnish suitable dainties for his repast; and therefore the landlord was compelled to send large orders to London, and get down the choicest products of Billingsgate and Covent Garden for his customer's use. Christian's misgivings had almost entirely disappeared: and he honestly thought that he must have wronged his employer by them. For if Mr. Sycamore were not everything he seemed and represented, would he not be at once detected? would he be allowed to lead such a life as this without molestation?

One day, at the expiration of about a fortnight, the landlord of the Royal Hotel requested Christian to step into his private parlour; and begging him with the utmost civility take a seat, he said, "I entreat your pardon, Mr. Ashton, for the course I am adopting: but from what I have seen of you, I have formed an opinion that leads me to it. Might I ask how long you have known Mr. Sycamore?"

"I was only introduced to him the very day before we came down to Ramsgate. I advertised in the *Times* for a situation as private secretary to a nobleman or gentleman: Mr. Sycamore answered the advertisement—letters were exchanged between us—I called upon him—and received the appointment."

"And where was he staying, sir, at the time?" inquired the landlord.

Christian mentioned the hotel in Piccadilly; and he thought it right to add that Mr. Sycamore had lived there upwards of three months—that he had spent a vast amount of money—and that he had paid all his bills with the utmost liberality ere leaving the metropolis.

The landlord's countenance brightened up; and after a little reflection, he said, "I am sure you will pardon me, Mr. Ashton, for thus boldly questioning you; but the truth is, we do get bitten sometimes by gentlemen who cut a dash and live extravagantly. Mr. Sycamore however *does* seem a regular gentleman: but there are one or two little circumstances which did cause me some uneasiness. The first is that in my waiter's hearing, and on the very first morning after his arrival, he dictated a letter to his London bankers, ordering them to remit him a considerable sum: and I happened to learn by inquiry at our Ramsgate bankers, that they have as yet received no advices to any such effect. Another circumstance is that none of the friends who visit him here were ever acquainted with him before. I ventured to ask Sir William Gregory this morning who Mr. Sycamore is. Because of course as he is an Honourable, he must be a peer's son; but Sir William himself seemed struck by the question, declaring that he had never thought of the matter before. Perhaps you can tell me, Mr. Ashton, who Mr. Sycamore's father is—or to what noble family he belongs?"

"Really," replied Christian, "I can only say as Sir William Gregory appears to have answered you, that I never thought of the matter before."

"You see, Mr. Ashton," continued the landlord, "there are two noblemen and three or four baronets who visit Mr. Sycamore: but between you and me, they are not at all likely to trouble themselves as to who or what he is, so long as he gives splendid champagne breakfasts and dinners."

"I can assure you," responded Christian, in some degree of affright, "that if there be anything wrong I am totally innocent——"

"I know you are," interrupted the landlord; "and that is the reason I took the liberty of questioning you. I saw at once that you were a well-conducted young gentleman—you live so quietly—you never take any wine—you do not avail yourself of your employer's permission that you are to have whatever you choose. Mind, I don't say there *is* anything wrong; and all you have told me about Mr. Sycamore's mode of life in London at the Picadilly Hotel, has eased me considerably. Prudence however suggests that I should make a little further inquiry. By the bye," exclaimed the landlord, "what if I were to write up to those London bankers of his? At all events, Mr. Ashton, you will not tell him that I have been questioning you."

"Not for the world!" responded our young hero.

At this moment the parlour door opened; and Mr. Sycamore lounged in with his wonted fashionable ease; and perceiving Christian there, he said, "Ah! Mr. Ashton, having a little chat with the landlord—eh?"

"Yes, sir," stammered Christian: and he rose to leave the room.

"Don't go—don't go," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore: "it's no secret. You are acquainted with all my affairs," he added with a laugh, "in your capacity of my private secretary."

Still Christian was moving towards the door, as he thought that the business might not concern him: but Mr. Sycamore, with an appearance of kind playfulness and urbane familiarity, said, "Really you need not go: for I repeat, I have no secrets that you are not acquainted with."

Christian was therefore compelled to remain; and Mr. Sycamore, depositing himself with easy indolence upon a chair, said, "Landlord, this is an admirable hotel of yours, and I have been doing my best to recommend it—but all to tiptop

people, mind!—no low persons will ever seek your establishment through any hint or suggestion from me. Ashton can tell you that I am very particular on that score—devilish particular."

"Of course, sir," observed the hotel-proprietor; "every gentleman is."

"I should think so indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Sycamore: "or else what would become of us?—damme, what would become of us?"

The landlord shook his head solemnly, as if inwardly repeating the question which had been put in so earnest a manner; and then he appeared lost in the wide field of speculation which it had opened to his mental view.

"By the bye," resumed Mr. Sycamore, after a pause, "you will have to keep a suite of rooms from Monday next for six weeks. They are for my friend Lord Toddington, from whom I have this morning received a letter to tell me that he is coming. You remember, Ashton, I told you his lordship was certain to come? Ah, here is his letter:"—and Mr. Sycamore tossed it to the landlord as he spoke.

The hotel-proprietor took and read it; and his countenance exhibited a brightening satisfaction at what he evidently regarded as a proof of Mr. Sycamore's sincerity.

"Yes, sir," he said, "the apartments shall be kept—and I thank you for the recommendation. His lordship, I perceive, is coming with his cousin the Hon. Captain Highflyer and his nephew Mr. Skelter: they will all be attended with their valets—and there are likewise three grooms to provide for."

"That's just it," said Mr. Sycamore; "and you perceive that his lordship requires breakfast, dining, and drawing-rooms. Damme, we shall have a fine time of it! Toddington is a devil of a fellow to drink champagne—and so is Highflyer: but Skelter will punish the burgundy. Ah, by the bye! that reminds me of something I had to suggest You must be very careful about your burgundy: Skelter is an excellent judge—and if he *does* take a fancy to it, he'll drink three or four bottles a day."

"I think, sir," remarked the hotel-proprietor, deferentially, "that you are enabled to pass an opinion upon my burgundy?"

"Yes—I think I may venture to say that it *is* excellent," responded Mr. Sycamore. "Well, then, Ashton, we must write to his lordship presently, and tell him that the rooms are engaged. Ah, by the bye, landlord, you will have to find stabling-accommodation for four horses, as you see by that letter."

"It shall be done, sir," was the hotel-proprietor's answer: and he proceeded to make certain memoranda in his books.

The Hon. Talbot Sycamore rose from his seat, and was lounging towards the door,—when apparently stricken with a sudden thought, he exclaimed, "Ah, by the bye, Ashton, just run up to the bank and inquire whether they have received a letter of advice about my remittances. I can't make out how the delay has been: it's too bad of those fellows in London—and all the worse because I am their private friend as well as their customer. They are no doubt overwhelmed with business: but if they don't pay more attention they will very soon lose it; and I for one don't mean to stand any nonsense. I'll close my account and cut them dead, if the money has not been sent by this last post."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sycamore looked uncommonly fierce, as if he had just come to a resolve which was perfectly inexorable, and from which he would not suffer himself to be moved even if all the partners in the London banking-firm went down upon their knees at his feet.

Christian Ashton hastened off to make the inquiry at the Ramsgate banker's; and the Hon. Talbot Sycamore lungingly resumed his chair,—saying, "I'll just wait here till my private secretary returns; and you shall give me a glass of that famous liqueur of your's that you sent up to us last evening."

The hotel-proprietor,—who had much approved of the firm and manly conduct of Mr. Sycamore in respect to the mode of dealing with his negligent London bankers,—displayed considerable alacrity in ringing the bell and ordering in the choice liqueur of which Mr. Sycamore had spoken. This gentleman quaffed a glass with the air of a connoisseur; and as he began to sip a second, he said, "I tell you what it is, landlord—there is not finer liqueur in all England than this. Toddington will like it"—another sip—"Highflyer will like it"—another sip—"and damme, Skelter will like it!"—and the last sip drained the glass.

In a few minutes Christian Ashton returned, with a visible expression of disappointment upon his features.

"Well, what news?" inquired Mr. Sycamore. "Am I to use harsh measures with those careless London bankers of mine? or am I to give them back all my confidence?"

"I am very much afraid, sir," responded our young hero, "that you will have to adopt the former course."

"Then, damme, I'll rush up to London at once!" exclaimed the Hon. Talbot Sycamore, starting from his chair with indignation depicted on his countenance. "I'll take the next train—I'll go to the bank—I'll order all my funds to be paid over to their great rivals, Pump, Aldgate, and Co.—I'll close my account—and, damme, I'll horsewhip the head of the firm and blacken the eyes of the chief cashier."

While giving vent to these dreadful threats, Mr. Sycamore appeared to be worked up into a towering passion; and the hotel-proprietor being convinced of the genuine sincerity of all his customer's proceedings since he had seen Lord Toddington's letter, ventured to intercede on behalf of the London bankers,—adding that perhaps another letter, written in very strong terms, might bring them to their senses—or that perhaps it would answer the same purpose if Mr. Ashton were sent up to London?

"To be sure!" cried Mr. Sycamore, suffering himself to be appeased to a certain extent. "I don't see why I should put myself out of the way for these careless negligent fellows. We'll just write them another letter, Ashton; and if that don't answer the purpose, you shall cut off to London the day after to-morrow, with full powers from me to close my account, thrash the principal, and pummel the cashier."

Our young hero expressed his readiness to undertake the journey to the metropolis whenever

called upon: but he thought it as well to abstain from pledging himself with regard to the thrashing and pummeling process.

"Come, Ashton," said his employer, "we will go and write this letter to the bankers, and also the one to my friend Toddington about the apartments. Oh, by the bye," added Mr. Sycamore, turning back from the door as he was about to open it, "just cash my cheque, landlord, for a couple of hundred. I shall date it the day after to-morrow, by which time my funds are certain to be here: or if you have a payment to make in the metropolis, I can of course draw it at sight on my London bankers."

The hotel-proprietor looked somewhat blank at the Hon. Talbot Sycamore's proposition: but that gloominess passed away in an instant, as divers considerations swept through his mind. There was Lord Toddington's letter promising a rich harvest for six weeks: the recommendations of Mr. Sycamore were very certain not to end there: but if he were offended he would leave the hotel himself, and prevent all his aristocratic acquaintances from taking up their quarters there in future.

"He *must* be all right," said the landlord to himself, as a sequel to those rapid musings: but still he thought that in respect to the required amount he might accomplish a prudential compromise. "It would really give me infinite pleasure, Mr. Sycamore," he observed, now speaking aloud, "to comply with your request——"

"Oh, it don't matter in the least!" exclaimed the gentleman, with an air of the most perfect indifference. "Ashton can run up to London by the next train—he will be down early to-morrow forenoon: and then all will be right. But I *do* know that at the hotel over the way they never refuse to cash a gentleman's cheque—damme, never!"

"Beg your pardon, sir—really did not mean to offend—did not for a moment think of refusing," said the frightened landlord; "but was only about to hint that my own account happens to be very low at my bankers'—and if a hundred pounds would suffice——"

"No—it don't matter," said Mr. Sycamore: and he was again lounging towards the door, when he turned back, observing, "Well, I'll draw the cheque—I want some loose gold for to-day."

The hotel-proprietor hastened to furnish writing-materials; and while Christian drew a cheque to Mr. Sycamore's dictation, the landlord drew another at his own desk. Mr. Sycamore appended his signature to the first-named draft; and receiving the landlord's cheque, he despatched Ashton to the Ramsgate bank for the cash. As our young hero was proceeding along the street, he observed that James the groom was following him: but he thought it was merely accidental, and that the man was going in the same direction, either for a walk or on some business of his own. But on issuing forth from the bank, Christian found James lurking about at the door, and now looking as if he were anxious to speak to him. Our young hero accordingly stopped: the groom accosted him, and with a touch of the hat, observed, "Beg pardon, Mr. Ashton—but I s'pose you've been to the bank to get money?"

"Yes," replied Christian, though in a cold and distant manner, for he thought the question impertinent. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for nothink partickler, sir!" responded James. "It's all right:"—and he turned to hasten away.

"Stop a moment!" exclaimed Christian. "You must have some reason for making such an inquiry. I suppose your master does not owe you any wages?"

"Not he, indeed, sir!" cried the groom: "he is always in advance rayther than t'otherwise. Only I knowed there was some little delay about master's money—and I was glad to thiuk the matter was put right. You see, Mr. Ashton," added James, with a look and a tone of mysterious confidence, "master is so negligent about his money-affairs—and it all comes of being too rich! Them London bankers of his'n takes the adwantage of him: and if I was him I'd cut 'em dead—that I would!"

Having thus spoken with a very determined air, James pressed down his hat fiercely upon his head, and looked very much as if he wished he had the chief of the London banking firm then and there in his presence, that he might inflict summary chastisement upon him. He walked slowly away; and Christian returned to the hotel. There he handed the money to his employer, who proceeded to dictate a very angry letter indeed to his London bankers—and then a very familiar one to his intimate friend Lord Toddington.

"Shall I take them to the post?" asked Christian,—which was the question he invariably put, but to which he had hitherto as invariably received a negative response.

On the present occasion, however, the Hon. Talbot Sycamore said that he might take them to the post; and thither he proceeded accordingly. He had forgotten to ask whether his services would be required any more for that day; and, having posted the letters, he hastened back to put the inquiry. On ascending towards Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room, he was just about to enter, when his ear caught so strange an observation from within, that he stopped short. The door happened to be ajar; and it was the dapper groom's voice that was making the observation.

"Come, none of this nonsense! I know you have got plenty of blunt—young Ashton told me so—and you must fork over twenty at least."

"I tell you, James," replied Mr. Sycamore, "that I could only manage to get a hundred pounds—and you must satisfy yourself with ten."

"Well, I s'pose I must, then," said the groom in a sulky tone: and Christian heard the chinking of gold. "But I say, how long's the game to last now?" inquired James.

"Hush, damn you! the door's open!" rejoined Sycamore in a low savage voice.

Christian glided away with a sensation as if he were walking in a dream. He was in a complete state of consternation and dismay; and he mechanically issued forth from the hotel. He was, as it were, an automaton moved only by an influence which was independent at the time of his own volition. When he gradually began to collect himself, he found that he was walking on the pier; and he felt as if he had been taken up from the hotel and set down there by some invisible hand: for he had not the slightest recollection of why or

how he had come thither at all. In a word, it was as if he were now awaking out of a dream in which he had been walking.

He proceeded to reflect upon what he had so recently heard; and it was with a species of bewildering terror that he thus meditated. That his employer was a rank swindler, there could be no doubt; and that James was in league with him, was equally certain. Christian recollected that the dapper groom had on more occasions than one sought to enter into discourse with him, and had invariably expatiated upon his master's wealth, standing, and aristocratic acquaintances.

"And all this was done," thought Christian to himself, with mingled indignation and bitterness, "that I might in my turn puff off my employer whenever questioned with regard to him. But what am I to do? shall I at once unmask him?"

Our young hero felt that this was his duty: and yet there was the lingering apprehension in his mind that he himself might be suddenly turned round upon and accused as an accomplice.

"But no," he said within himself, after further reflection; "it is impossible that I can become thus compromised! The landlord of the hotel told me that he felt persuaded I am an honourable young man. Good heavens! to think that I should have thus become the tool and instrument of a vile adventurer!"

Our hero's mind was made up; and he retraced his way to the hotel, with the determination of speaking to the landlord. But on inquiring for him, Christian was informed that he had gone up to London by the train half-an-hour previously.

"Then," thought Christian to himself, "he has doubtless set off to make his own inquiries: he will be back either late to-night or early to-morrow—and a few hours' delay will make no great difference."

Christian again issued from the hotel, and wandered forth, painfully reflecting on the discovery he had made with regard to his employer. As the hour approached at which he was wont to dine, he was resolved not to increase on his own account that hotel bill which he felt assured would never be paid by Mr. Sycamore; and he repaired to a tavern, where he ordered some refreshments. It was a third-rate hostelry; and the coffee-room was fitted with boxes in the old-fashioned style. At the moment Christian entered, only one of these boxes was occupied; and this was by two men, somewhat plainly though not shabbily dressed, and who were discussing cold beef and porter. Christian sat down in the next box, and took up a newspaper until his dinner was brought in.

"So they say he dines at half-past six and won't be in till then—is that it?" observed one of the men to his companion: and though they spoke in a low voice, yet Christian could not possibly help overhearing what was said.

"I have already told you so once," was the response given in a sulky growling tone: "but you are such a chap for making a feller repeat the same thing over and over again!"

"Every one who knows honest Ike Shadbolt," remarked the first speaker, when he had refreshed himself with a deep draught out of the pewter pot, "gives him credit for prudence and circumspection. I tell you what it is, friend Withers;—when two gentlemen like you and me have got a delicate business of this here nature in hand, we must put our heads together to conduct it in the nicest, pleasantest, comfortablest way:"—then, after a pause, he asked, "Does nothing strike you?"

"What the deuce should strike me," growled the individual whose name appeared to be Withers, "except that we've got to do a certain job at half-past six?"

"But look you, friend Withers," resumed Mr. Shadbolt, "there are two ways of doing a thing—one with a rumpus, and one without it. This customer of our's that we've come down after, has no doubt got plenty of ready tin; and why not so conduct ourselves that a little of it shall find its way into our pockets?"

"How so?" asked Mr. Withers, who seemed to be speaking with a mouth very full of bread and beef.

"How so!" echoed Mr. Shadbolt contemptuously: "was there ever such a feller——"

"Well, then, why don't you speak out plain?" growlingly demanded Mr. Withers, who might possibly have been a very excellent member of society, but who certainly appeared to be afflicted with a most unamiable temper.

"Five words will explain," was Mr. Shadbolt's response. "If we make a public affair of it—announce ourselves at the hotel—put on handcuffs—and drag our customer up to the railway station like a felon, he won't thank us—will he? And not thanking us, he won't give us each five guineas as a reward for our civility? Answer me that."

"What the devil answer does it require?" sulkily demanded Mr. Withers: "the thing speaks far itself."

"To be sure it does!" continued Mr. Shadbolt: "and so does the next proposition I am going to submit to your consideration. What if we do the thing quite genteel,—just introduce ourselves as Mr. Smith and Mr. Noakes—two gentlemen come down on very particular business indeed to see the Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore——I say, did that young chap start there in the next box?"

"Not he," growled Mr. Withers: "he is reading the paper, and can't hear what we are saying. But you'd better make an end of this long talk of yours."

"Well, then," resumed Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, "I was saying if we do the thing quite genteel—see our customer alone—whisper in his ear a pressing invitation to accompany us to London—let him pay for the three first-class places—and put him quite at his ease the whole way,—don't you think he's very likely to make us a compliment? Just leave it to me, and I'll give him such a hint that we'll get our tip beforehand."

"Well, do as you like," answered Mr. Withers, unbending somewhat from the sullen dignity in which he was previously wrapped up close. "You're a cunning fellow, Ike—and as you say, I don't see why we shouldn't blend profit with business."

"That's so sensible a remark," observed Mr. Shadbolt, "that we'll have another pot on the strength of it:"—and he rang the bell accordingly.

The waiter appeared at the instant,—bringing in Christian's dinner: but when it was placed before our young hero, he could not eat a morsel. He saw that the crisis was at hand: his employer

was evidently about to be arrested on some serious charge of felony; and these were London police-officers who had come down for the purpose. As for giving Mr. Sycamore a warning instruction, such an idea did not for a moment enter young Ashton's head:—so far from defeating justice under such circumstances, he felt himself bound to do all he could to further its aims.

Christian looked up at the clock in the coffee-room: it was just five,—and therefore in another hour and a half Mr. Sycamore would be in custody. The conversation in the adjoining box had been temporarily suspended, from the fact that, the second pot of porter having been discussed, Messrs. Shadbolt and Withers had just began to regale themselves with glasses of hot rum-and-water; and it apparently took them some little time to arrive, by dint of divers sippings and tastings, at a conclusion as to whether the compound was to their liking or not.

"What a rum feller that chap Sycamore appears to be by all accounts!" said Mr. Shadbolt, at length breaking that interval of silence. "What a game he was carrying on at the hotel in Piccadilly—what is its name again?—before he got that forged bill cashed."

"A game indeed!" growled Mr. Withers. "But how do you account for this,—that when he did get it cashed, he took and paid all his debts and came off like a gentleman when he might have bolted away with all the blunt?"

"Why, don't you see," responded Shadbolt, "it was a three months' bill; and he never thought the forgery would be detected till it came due. So no doubt his plan was to enjoy life in the meantime. But if he had left London without paying his debts, he would have been blown upon. I dare say he meant to pay the watering-places a visit one after the other; and at each he would of course refer to the Piccadilly Hotel—what's its name again?—as a proof of his respectability."

Christian felt so sick and dizzy at all he had heard, and likewise in consequence of the excitement through which he had for the few previous hours been passing, that he could not remain in the hot stifling coffee-room any longer. He accordingly paid his bill, and departed. He walked out upon the pier to reflect upon the course he ought to adopt,—whether he should at once proceed to the Royal Hotel, pack up his box, and depart—or whether he should await the expected catastrophe. He was apprehensive that if he adopted the former course, it might be subsequently imagined he had been all along Sycamore's accomplice, and that he fled from the presence of impending danger the moment he heard of it. But while he was yet deliberating within himself, he suddenly perceived Mr. Sycamore advancing along the pier, in company with a couple of the fashionable acquaintances whom he had formed at Ramsgate. A sudden thought flashed to Christian's mind, and he resolved to act upon it.

CHAPTER LXII.

SIR JOSEPH STEWARD.

APPROACHING the group, who had stopped to gaze upon a vessel in the distance, our hero said in a cold firm voice, "Mr. Sycamore, I wish to have a few moments' conversation with you."

"With me! What about?" exclaimed that individual. "Don't you see I am engaged with friends for the present? Damme, man, I'm engaged!"

"Mr. Sycamore," responded Christian, "that which I have to say to you, will admit of no delay."

"Oh, ah—I see!" ejaculated our hero's employer: and turning to his friends, he said in an easy off-hand manner, "It is about some little business that I entrusted to my private secretary. Excuse me for a few minutes: I will speedily rejoin you."

Christian allowed the falsehood about the "little private business" to pass unnoticed; and he moved away from the spot. Sycamore was almost immediately by his side; and he said in a hurried anxious voice, "What is it, Ashton?—why the deuce do you look so serious?"

"I cannot speak to you here," responded Christian. "I will thank you to accompany me to the hotel."

"But what is it?" demanded Sycamore, who did not dare be angry; for he saw that there was indeed something ominously wrong.

Christian made no answer—but led the way straight to the hotel,—Sycamore walking by his side, and continuing to ask what it all meant, but without receiving a single syllable in reply. In a very few minutes the hotel was reached: Christian proceeded straight up to his employer's sitting-room; and when they were both there alone together, Mr. Sycamore said, "Now will you tell me what the deuce you mean by this strange conduct on your part?"

"Simply this," answered Ashton,—"that it does not suit me to remain any longer in your employment; and I require a written acknowledgment to the effect that our acquaintance has only lasted a fortnight—that it commenced under certain circumstances—and that it is of my own accord I at this particular hour insist on severing our connexion."

Sycamore's countenance grew more and more blank, and his manner more and more nervous, as our hero went on speaking. He nevertheless exerted every effort to veil his confusion and his misgivings, which indeed amounted to terror: but he could not succeed—and in a trembling voice he said, "But my dear Ashton——"

"Address me not, sir, in so familiar a manner!" exclaimed our young hero, indignantly: "do not ask me another question—but sit down at once and pen such a document as I have suggested."

"One word—and only one word!" cried the trembling villain. "Something must have been said—you must have heard something——"

"At all events I have seen enough," interrupted Christian, "to be only too anxious that our connexion should be severed."

"The people of the hotel—have they said anything to you?" asked Sycamore.

"Nothing more has been said to me since I left your presence in the forenoon:"—and then it struck Christian that if he left Mr. Syeamore in a state of fearful uncertainty, he might suddenly abscond,—in which case justice would be cheated of its due, and he himself would have given that very warning intimation which he had resolved not to afford. He accordingly went on to say, "I see through you, Mr. Sycamore; and that is the reason I choose to leave you. But for my own character's sake I am determined to have such a certificate or acknowledgment as that which I have described."

"You see through me?" Sycamore repeated involuntarily: for he was trembling and quivering, and his senses were almost lost under the influence of terror. "But the people of the hotel——"

"They doubtless continue in the same happy state of credulity," answered Christian, "as that into which you have succeeded in lulling them? Now, sir, without further delay, give me the document."

"But what use will you make of it?" asked Sycamore, who for an instant thought of bullying and blustering: but the next moment he felt that he had better not—for Christian's demeanour was firm and resolute.

"The only use I shall make of it," replied the young man, "is that if ever a word be uttered aspersing my character in connexion with your name, I shall at one produce that document."

Mr. Sycamore appeared to be relieved somewhat by this assurance: yet still he required another one;—and he said in a voice of abject entreaty, "You will not, Mr. Ashton—you will not breathe a disparaging word——"

"I promise you that I shall not meddle unnecessarily in your affairs," interrupted Christian. "The first thing to-morrow morning I shall leave Ramsgate."

"Oh! of course I shall pay you the money that is due to you," cried Mr. Sycamore, who began to breathe more freely: and he even resumed somewhat of his jaunty air of indifference.

"Not a shilling!" ejaculated Christian. "I would not touch a single farthing of the money which you have in your possession!—and I will thank you to add to the document that I thus positively renounce every fraction in the shape of salary or remuneration."

"Well, just as you like," observed Mr. Sycamore, half sullenly, half flippantly: and then, as he sate down at the writing-table, he added with an ironical smile, "It is now for you to dictate and for me to wield the pen."

Christian took no notice of this species of sarcastic jest: but he began to dictate a document in the sense which he had already sketched forth,—rendering the terms altogether exculpatory of himself with regard to complicity in whatsoever misdeeds might subsequently transpire in respect to his employer. Sycamore winced considerably beneath this infliction—for such to all intents and purposes it was. Once or twice he looked up into Christian's countenance: but he beheld firm resoluteness there; and he was compelled to write on unto the end. When he had finished and signed the document, Christian read it carefully over—folded it up—and placed it in his pocket.

"You really don't mean me any mischief?" said Mr. Sycamore, again adopting a tone of entreaty.

"Whatever promises I have made you," answered our hero, "shall be faithfully fulfilled."

He then issued from the room; and descending to the bar of the hotel, said to the young female who kept the accounts in the landlord's absence, "Can you make me out a bill altogether separate from that of Mr. Sycamore?"

"Certainly I can, sir," she replied, with a look of amazement. "But why do you ask the question?"

"Because I have resigned my situation with Mr. Sycamore," responded Christian: "and as I intend to leave the hotel to-morrow morning, it suits my arrangements with Mr. Sycamore to settle my own account off-hand."

"In that case, sir," answered the bar-maid, "your bill shall be made out. But I hope that there has been no sudden disagreement—nothing unpleasant——"

"Do not say another word now," interrupted Christian: "and I will take an opportunity of letting you know all about it a little later."

He then repaired to his own room, where he began to pack up his things in preparation for departure in the morning.

Meanwhile Mr. Sycamore had been left in no very enviable state of feeling: for he could not rightly conjecture the cause of Christian's conduct. Indeed he knew not whether it were better to decamp at once—or whether he might venture to remain at the hotel until the first thing in the morning—at which time he had already come to the determination of departing likewise. After having taken two or three agitated and uneasy turns to and fro in the room, he rang the bell and desired that his man James might be ordered to step up to him.

"Well, James," said Mr. Sycamore, as soon as his accomplice made his appearance, "things seem to be taking an awkward aspect——But are you sure you have shut the door?"

"Yes, yes—the door's shut fast enow," answered James. "But how do you mean that things is looking orkard? Where's the orkardness?"

"I mean that young Ashton has suddenly left me," responded Sycamore; "and he said as plainly as he could speak that he has seen through me."

"How could he have found out anythink?" asked James. "Did he suspect that you yourself answered them letters which was written to Dukes, Marquises, and Earls, bankers and Baronets; and that I sent up them answers of your'n in a parcel to my brother in London to be posted there?"

"I don't know how he came to suspect," replied Sycamore impatiently: "but I do know that the case is getting devilish serious."

"But you meant to leave to-morrow morning," said James: "it was agreed upon 'twixt you and me that our quarters was to be shifted."

"Yes," exclaimed Sycamore; "because I reckoned upon what this evening's business might produce. Here have I got hold of two young chaps with plenty of money—I have already ascertained that they are ready to take a hand at cards or rattle the dice—a splendid little dinner is ordered—I should ply them with champagne—I

should get them into a nice train—and I know deuced well it would be worth a couple of thousand—perhaps more. Then away to Dover to-morrow—and off to Boulogne! That was the plan: but how the deuce I'm to act now, I can't for the life of me decide."

"You must risk it," answered James. "Everything seems right enough amongst the hotel-people—though by the bye I did hear that the landlord is gone up to London: but he can't very well get back again till to-morrow—and by the time he comes we may be far away."

"Ah! but there is such a thing as sending down a telegraphic message!" ejaculated Mr. Sycamore, with a sudden consternation upon his features.

"By jingo, aye!" cried James, looking equally discomfited. "I never thought of them galvanic wires which talks eighty or a hundred mile at a stretch."

"Well, what is to be done?" asked Sycamore, pacing the room in agitation and bewilderment. "To have to bolt with a beggarly hundred guineas in one's pocket, would be a wretched affair indeed!"

"Why didn't you follow my advice," asked James, sullenly, "and bolt from the hotel in Piccadilly when you got the five hundred pounds? What the devil was the use of paying all them debts——"

"You know what my calculations were," answered Sycamore impatiently. "I thought that we should come down here with such a good name that by this time I might have hooked thousands out of the young fellows at play: and now, just as the opportunity is serving, the storm begins to gather as dark as possible."

"Well, but does young Ashton mean to peach?" inquired the dapper groom: "that's the pint."

"No—I don't think he does: and yet there is something strange and mysterious in his conduct which I cannot altogether understand."

"Never mind the strangeness!" responded the groom: "you must run the risk. Let the dinner go on—let the young chaps come—do you feather your nest—and we'll make a bolt of it precious early in the morning. You've got loads of jewellery and different things that you can carry away easy enough; and as for the clothes, they must of course be left behind."

Mr. Sycamore reflected for a few minutes; and then said, "Well, James, it must be as you have suggested: the dinner shall go on—and we will risk it."

In the meanwhile Christian Ashton, having given his instructions to the bar-maid in respect to his bill, issued from the hotel to ramble about and commune with himself. He bitterly regretted that he had ever entered the employment of such a person as Mr. Sycamore: he blamed himself for want of prudence and caution in having adhered to his engagement after his suspicions were first awakened at the hotel in Piccadilly. But it was unfortunately too late thus to remonstrate with himself; and his repinings were useless. He had made up his mind, as the reader has seen, to discharge his own account at the hotel, and thus prove that his principles were upright;—and we must observe that he had an ample supply of ready money, inasmuch as a comparatively small inroad had been made upon the fifty guineas presented to him by Mr. Redcliffe after the affair at Oaklands several months back. He resolved to remain absent from the hotel until after Mr. Sycamore's arrest; as he did not wish to be present to have the appearance of triumphing in the downfall of that individual.

He roamed beyond the precincts of Ramsgate, out into the country: but so absorbed was he in his reflections, that his walk was prolonged to even a greater distance than he had first intended. The fields through which he had been proceeding, brought him towards the high road; and he sate upon a stile to rest himself ere he began to retrace his way. About a hundred yards off stood a house of handsome appearance, having a flower-garden enclosed with iron railings in front—and with a kitchen-garden, shrubbery, paddock, and other grounds in the rear. The habitation stood all alone; and Christian was just wondering to himself in a sort of abstracted manner who dwelt there, when his ear suddenly caught the sounds of an equipage advancing along the road at a rapid rate. It was a travelling carriage with four horses; and as it whirled by the spot where Christian was resting himself, he caught a transient glimpse of two ladies seated inside. One of them appeared to be of exceeding beauty, so far as he could judge by that passing look: but he had no opportunity of particularly noticing the features of the other. Scarcely however had the equipage thus dashed by, when there was a sudden crash—the postilions shouted out—and the horses began to plunge. The hinder axle of the carriage had broken; and the vehicle itself had only been saved from completely upsetting by falling against the high bank which bordered the road on the opposite side to that where Christian was placed. Screams thrilled from within the carriage; and in a moment our young hero was flying towards the spot to render his assistance.

The postilions were so busily occupied in restraining their frightened horses, that they could not at once help in extricating the ladies from the interior of the carriage; and therefore Christian's prompt appearance on the scene of the accident was most opportune. He hastened to open the door which was uppermost; and to his hastily put inquiry, he received the assurance that the two ladies had experienced no more serious inconvenience than the sudden shock and the accompanying alarm had occasioned. He aided them to descend: his idea of the beauty of one was immediately confirmed; and he now perceived that the other was as handsome and as commanding in appearance as the former was more delicately and youthfully charming. But he had not many moments to contemplate the ladies, nor to reiterate the expression of his hope that they had sustained no injury, ere another individual appeared upon the scene. This was an elderly gentleman, who with half-shuffling half-hobbling gait had issued forth from the house which Christian was a few minutes back so much admiring. He was one of the oddest looking beings that our hero had ever beheld, with the single exception perhaps of the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles. He was enveloped in a flowered silk dressing-gown of the gayest pattern: a cap of the same material contrasted strangely with his gray hair and his coarse,

sensual, forbidding features. His feet, which had a gouty appearance, were thrust into loose slippers; and though it was now past six o'clock in the evening, yet it seemed—to judge by his apparel—as if this singular old man had only just got out of bed.

The lady to whom we have alluded as being of a fine and commanding beauty, was about thirty years of age; and her handsome countenance had a bold and resolute expression. Her companion whom we have described as beautiful, was at least ten years younger. The former had dark hair and eyes—the latter brown hair and blue eyes. Immediately upon the old man approaching this group, exclamations of recognition were exchanged by himself and the elder lady—at the same time that they shook hands.

"My dear Mrs. Oxenden, what an accident! what a way to arrive at your old friend's house!" ejaculated the elderly gentleman, with an air of the deepest concern.

"It is fortunate that the accident should have occurred close by your door, Sir Joseph," answered Mrs. Oxenden: "or else we might have had a long and tedious walk."

Christian observed that while these observations were being exchanged, the young and beautiful lady appeared to be suddenly stricken with a sort of dismay. She started—she looked in wild bewilderment upon the shuffling, shambling old man—and then she stood transfixed with consternation and painful wonderment. Christian was himself astonished at the effect thus produced upon her: and in the confusion of his own thoughts, he was about to ask if anything had distressed or frightened her, when the old man, having first bent a devouring regard upon the young lady, fixed his looks suspiciously upon our hero.

"This young gentleman," Mrs. Oxenden hastened to observe, "is not one of our party: he is a stranger—and he came forward most kindly to render us his assistance."

"Oh, very good!" said the old man with an air of relief: and then he again turned his eyes upon the young lady, who became pale as death and seemed as if she were about to faint.

"We thank you most sincerely, sir," said Mrs. Oxenden, turning towards our hero, but with a certain impatience in her air, as if she felt him to be one too many upon the spot and wished him to be gone.

He dared not remain any longer—he had no excuse: he accordingly raised his hat; and was turning away when he perceived that the young lady gave a half-start as if she would have flown towards him for protection.

"Laura, do not be foolish!" said Mrs. Oxenden, in an under-tone, but with rapid and peremptory utterance: and she caught the young lady by the arm, at the same time bending upon her a look of almost menacing significancy with her imperious dark eyes. "This is Sir Joseph Steward."

A low faint shriek, coming from the lips of the beautiful but afflicted Laura, caught Christian's ear as he was again turning from the spot;—and again under an irresistible influence of pity and compassion for that young lady, did he stop short. Mrs. Oxenden now darted upon him a look full of anger, and she said, "Your presence, sir, becomes an intrusion effacing the sense of gratitude for the assistance you rendered."

Christian's countenance grew crimson at this rebuke so pointed and almost insolent; and he hastened away from the spot. But on reaching the stile, he glanced back; and at that instant Sir Joseph Steward was addressing something to the young lady. He had laid one hand familiarly upon her shoulder; and with the pointed forefinger of the other hand he was gesticulating as if to convey impressiveness to the words he was uttering. Laura was shrinking in visible terror and dismay—while Mrs. Oxenden, who stood behind the old man, was bending upon her a look of mingled reproach and command. This was the spectacle which met our hero's eyes,—filling him with renewed wonderment and compassion, and for a few moments riveting him to the spot whence he contemplated what was thus passing. But again did he catch the dark eyes of Mrs. Oxenden flashing an angry glance towards him; and struck with the impropriety of thus obtrusively seeming to meddle with other persons' business, he began to take his hurried way back across the fields.

While retracing his steps to Ramsgate, which was about three miles distant—for, as we have already said, he had wandered much farther than he intended when first setting out for his walk—he naturally pondered all that had just taken place. Profound was his pity on behalf of that young and beautiful lady who had evidently been introduced to Sir Joseph Steward for the first time, and who had shrunk with so much surprise, aversion, and dismay at his presence. What could it all mean?—was some compulsory marriage in contemplation? or was anything worse intended? Christian half regretted that he had not lingered upon the spot to ascertain whether he could really render any assistance to a young lady against whom he feared an outrage of some kind or another was being contemplated. While thus reflecting, he beheld a milk-woman advancing across the field; and he resolved to question her. As an introduction to the wished-for discourse he asked for a draught of milk, for which he paid her liberally; and he inquired, "Does not that house belong to Sir Joseph Steward?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply; "and a strange old gentleman he is."

"In what way?" asked Christian.

"Oh! he lives such a queer sort of life when he is at home," responded the milk-woman; "and dresses in such an odd fashion that the little boys in the neighbourhood all laugh at him: and then he tries to run after them to beat them with his cane—but he never can catch them because of the gout in his feet."

"Is he married?" inquired Christian.

"No, sir," answered the woman: and then with a meaning look, she added, "But I'm sure he ought to be; for there isn't a decent girl in all these parts will go into his service."

"You mean to say," observed Christian, trembling on the beautiful Laura's behalf at what he thus heard, "that Sir Joseph Steward is not very correct in his conduct?"

"Correct? No, sir!" exclaimed the woman. "My sister was fool enough to let her daughter take a situation at Verner House—that's the name of his place—but she was a good girl, and so no harm came of it: but it was for no want of trying on Sir Joseph's part if she didn't meet her ruin there. He is very rich, but does no good with his money: he is a bad landlord and a bad master; and I shouldn't mind telling him so to his face. Ah! sir, old as he is, and with one foot in the grave, I can tell you that he has brought sorrow into many a humble home in these parts: for if he don't use his riches to do good, he is lavish enough of his gold when it is to do harm. You understand me, sir?"

"I do—unfortunately I do," rejoined Christian, his thoughts painfully associating themselves with the beautiful Laura; and when he remembered that she had an air of artless innocence strongly contrasting with the fierce commanding and imperious demeanour of Mrs. Oxenden, he felt his blood boiling with indignation at the bare suspicion of what might be in store for that defenceless being.

"Yes, sir," continued the milk-woman, "there are many people about here who could tell a tale but little creditable to Sir Joseph Steward; and my only surprise is that he hasn't had his brains beat out long ago by some indignant husband, father, or brother. But money is such a power!—and if it does much mischief, it can also help to hush it up. Would you believe it—Sir Joseph is a magistrate; and that gives him an opportunity of terrifying the poor wretches whom he has first injured."

"Do you happen to know the name of Oxenden?" inquired our hero.

"No, sir," answered the woman. "But I must be going—for I am already later than usual."

Christian could not detain her any longer; and he had heard enough to deepen all the compassion he had previously felt on behalf of the beautiful Laura, as well as to fill him with the most serious

apprehensions that some dark plot was in contemplation against that defenceless being's peace of mind. But how could he assist her?—and this was the question which he kept asking himself during the remainder of his walk back into Ramsgate.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE FINALE OF THE SYCAMORE EPISODE.

In the meantime what had been passing at the Royal Hotel in that town? At about a quarter past six o'clock two young gentlemen were introduced by the waiter to Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room; and that individual received them with every appearance of the warmest friendship. One was barely twenty-two—the other a few months younger still: both on coming of age had inherited fortunes—both were inexperienced, giddy, gay, and extravagant—anxious to be considered very fine dashing fellows, and never pausing to reflect at what high price they were purchasing this reputation. There was no kinship between them: but they had been to college together, and their intimacy was renewed when launching themselves upon the great sea of life. They considered Mr. Sycamore to be the very pink of everything that was most admirable, fascinating, and worthy of imitation as a man of fashion; and they were as proud of having obtained his friendship as if they were associating with the highest aristocrat in the land.

Such were the two young gentlemen whom Mr. Sycamore had invited to dinner; and on their being introduced, he ordered the waiter to have the banquet served up at once. The command was promptly obeyed; and Mr. Sycamore sat down to table with his guests. The courses of soup and fish passed off agreeably enough; and Sycamore felt his spirits revive as he perceived that the young gentlemen were in an excellent humour to do justice to the wine. With the third course the champagne was introduced; and after the first glass the young gentlemen began to grow very talkative, and likewise to show off their airs.

"Well, you speak of fine women down here, Sycamore," said one, running his fingers in an affected manner through his perfumed hair; "but I vow and declare I have not seen any to my taste."

"What! not at bathing time?" asked Mr. Sycamore with a knowing look. "Why, my dear fellow, I saw you on the sands for three hours yesterday, nearly all the while the tide served; and you never once had your glass down from your eye."

"'Pon my soul, that's too bad, Sycamore!" said the young gentleman, infinitely delighted at this flattering compliment to his rakish propensities. "I must confess I saw more of Lady Harriet's bust than she usually displays when in evening costume——and yet you know she *does* dress devilish low."

"Ah!" cried Sycamore, "I always thought there was something between you and Lady Harriet—especially as her husband neglects her."

"Come, come, Sycamore—don't be scandalous!" said the young gentleman, laughing immensely. "Suppose I did dance five times running with Lady Harriet the other evening—and suppose I did sit next to her at supper—and suppose I did ride out on horseback with her next day——why, what then? People of course can draw their own inferences: but I say nothing."

"You are two young rakes," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore, pumping up the merriest laugh he could possibly force by that artificial process; "and I shall really lose my character if I am seen in your company: I shall be set down as bad as yourselves. Come, fill—and pass the champagne."

"It's all this fellow here who leads me into mischief," continued the same young gentleman who had previously been speaking, and who now alluded to his companion, who was just a few months older than himself. "I should like to know how he gets on with that pretty little widow with the sweet blue eyes?"

"Oh, if you think I mean matrimony," drawled out the young gentleman thus alluded to, at the same time giving an affected laugh, "you are most gloriously mistaken—and the little widow knows it. Mind, I do not say that she is of a larking disposition: but suppose she is—and that she takes a fancy to me—and suppose that she has no objection to a little amour upon the sly,—well, is she the worse? or am I the worse? Just answer me that."

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated Mr. Sycamore. "But of course we now know what it all means, and on what terms the pretty little widow and you stand together."

We may as well observe for the information of the reader, that the Lady Harriet and the pretty little widow thus spoken of, were two as virtuous ladies as any in the whole world—and that by no levity, much less impropriety on their parts, had they ever afforded the slightest ground for these diabolically impertinent modes in which their names were mentioned. It is too often the case that the characters of well-principled women are nodded, and winked, and hinted away as a sacrifice to the miserable vanity of profligate coxcombs, who flatter themselves that it is very fine indeed and "quite the thing" to have such little *liaisons* on hand. Sycamore, as a man of the world, knew perfectly well that it was nothing but mere vaunt and braggadocio on the part of his guests: but he encouraged it—he pretended to believe in it—he ministered to their wretched vanity—and he concluded by telling them that they were two desperate fellows, and that if he had a wife or sisters he would sooner shut them up in convents than allow such irresistibles to approach them. All this elevated the two shallow-brained young gentlemen into perfect ecstacies; and they began talking more largely still, but in somewhat another strain.

"For my part," said he who was barely twenty-two, "I am getting tired of England—I think I shall go abroad. I have seen so much of life, I am pretty near worn out."

"Well, it's just the case with me," observed the other young gentleman; "there's no enjoyment in pleasure now. When one has had the finest women in England at his command, and revelled so in wine that he can stand anything and has not even the luxury of getting gloriously drunk,

he may begin to talk of satiety. 'Pon my word, I'd give anything for a headache next morning after a debauch, by way of a change."

"Ah! you two fellows have seen *too much* of life!" observed Sycamore, with a deprecating shake of the head, as if it were a very serious matter indeed: "you have gone at such a devil of a pace! But after all, there's nothing like it."

"Nothing!" said the younger of the two gentlemen. "A short life and a merry one."

"Ah, that's my maxim!" exclaimed the other. "Pass the champagne."

At this moment the waiter entered, and whispered to Mr. Sycamore, "A gentleman, sir, wishes to speak to you for a moment. He says he has called about a yacht."

"A yacht?" ejaculated Sycamore aloud. "It must be a mistake. I have not spoken to any one——"

"The gentleman says, sir," continued the waiter, still in a whisper, "that he *must* speak to you—and he won't detain you a minute."

"What's his name?" asked Sycamore, growing somewhat uneasy at this announcement of the stranger's pertinacity to obtain an interview with him.

"His name, sir? Oh, he says it is Mr. Smith—and his friend's is Mr. Noakes."

"Ah, he has a friend with him?" said Sycamore: and this circumstance, as well as the two names which seemed to be most ominously like fictitious ones, sent a cold apprehension to the conscience-stricken individual's heart.

"Don't suffer yourself to be intruded upon now!" exclaimed one of the young gentlemen.

"Say that Mr. Sycamore is not within?" cried the other, in an authoritative tone to the waiter.

"And if they don't go, pitch them down the stairs," added the first.

"Or toss them out of the window," superadded the second.

"What shall I say, sir?" asked the waiter, who himself looked somewhat embarrassed, as if he had a vague suspicion of impending evil floating in his mind—although he most probably considered Messrs. Smith and Noakes to be sheriffs'-officers, and therefore to have no mission more serious than that of the execution of civil process.

"Are they *really* gentlemen?" inquired Sycamore, who now felt as if boiling oil were pouring through his veins.

"Well, sir, they told me to say they was," answered the waiter: but he did not think it necessary to state in addition the trifling fact that a half-crown had been thrust into his hand as a bribe for the representation of the gentility of Messrs. Smith and Noakes.

"I think I had better see them," said Mr. Sycamore, whose perturbation—amounting indeed to anguish—was so plainly visible that the waiter fancied he beheld therein the confirmation of his fears, and the two young gentlemen began to exchange suspicious looks. "Where are they?" inquired Sycamore, as the thought suddenly struck him that he would pass into the next room, put on his hat, and decamp as quickly as his legs would carry him.

"They are on the landing, sir," responded the waiter.

Mr. Sycamore's countenance grew terribly blank, as he at once comprehended that the avenue of escape was thus completely closed; while the circumstance that Messrs. Smith and Noakes preferred waiting outside the door rather than being shown to his sitting-room, fearfully confirmed all his worst terrors. Nevertheless, he had still sense enough left amidst the anguished confusion of his thoughts, to comprehend that the two individuals who sought him were evidently disposed to conduct their proceedings in as delicate a way as possible; and whatever might happen, he himself had no inclination to excite the scandal of exposure.

"Tell them I will come immediately," he said: and he filled a bumper of champagne in the hope of giving himself courage and deadening the frightful horror of his thoughts: but the wine, which a few minutes back had flowed like nectar down his throat, now appeared to remain there as if against the impediment of the feelings which well nigh suffocated him.

"What the deuce does it all mean, Sycamore?" asked one of the young gentlemen, the instant the waiter had left the room. "Is it a case of tapping on the shoulder? If so, make use of me—I'm your man for a few hundreds."

"And I also!" exclaimed the other young gentleman. "Always stick by your friend—and never say die till you're dead. That's my motto."

It was with a ghastly look that Sycamore endeavoured to say something with a laugh of forced cheerfulness: but horribly apprehensive that those who awaited him, would lose all patience and come in to seek him if he tarried any longer, he hurried from the room. On the landing he beheld the self-styled Messrs. Smith and Noakes; and one of them said, "Can we have a little talk together in private, Mr. Sycamore?"

"This way, gentlemen," said the miserable wretch in a half-choking voice: and he led them into his sitting-room, which in addition to the door that thus opened upon the landing, had another communicating with the parlour that served as his dining-room.

The two individuals kept very close upon Mr. Sycamore, as they followed him into the room and after they had entered it; and the one who acted as spokesman, said with a significant look, "You will give us credit, sir, for having discharged this unpleasant little duty in as delicate a way as possible. My name isn't Smith—nor is my partner's name Noakes. Allow us to introduce ourselves as Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, and Mr. William Withers, both very much at your service."

"Not too loud—not too loud!" gasped Sycamore, indicating the door of communication between the two rooms. "Who are you, gentlemen?" he faltered forth. "Is it—is it—debt?" and the unhappy man would have given worlds at that moment to be told that he was merely about to be consigned to a debtor's gaol; but a secret voice whispered in his soul that it was *not* for debt.

"Well sir, we are officers, it is true," replied Mr. Shadbolt, who thought it necessary to break the matter as delicately as possible, inasmuch as he entertained the hope that the reward would be commensurate with the amount of his kind consideration: "but we are not exactly sheriffs'-officers

—though my friend Withers was a few years back, if I don't mistake. You was a bum-bailiff once, Withers—wasn't you?"

"What's that to you?" growled the sulky gentleman, who thought that his comrade was carrying the delicacy of the proceeding to a most unnecessary degree of refinement. "Whatsomever I was once, I'm a detective now."

"You see, sir," continued Mr. Shadbolt, "that there isn't a better-hearted fellow in all the world than my friend Withers; and there isn't a more gentlemanly dog than honest Ike Shadbolt—though he says it of himself which shouldn't say it. Gay and dashing gentlemen like you, sir, will get into trouble; and with such brilliant examples as Dr. Dodd and Mr. Fauntleroy before your eyes, forgery must be looked upon as one of the genteel little frailties of which human natur' is susceptible in this sublunary spear."

Having thus wound up his truly beautiful and highly edifying speech—wherein by an ingenious implication he conveyed to the prisoner the precise charge for which he was captured—Mr. Shadbolt took a pinch of snuff, and affected to be a long time in partaking of that refreshment—which was another piece of delicate consideration on his part, the purpose being to afford Mr. Sycamore leisure to compose his feelings.

"Am I to go with you?" asked the wretched man, his countenance white as a sheet and his whole form trembling nervously.

"In course you be," growled Mr. Withers, who seemed offended at the bare idea of the necessity for such a proceeding being doubted.

"Hold your tongue, Withers," said Mr. Shadbolt. "The fact is, my dear sir, we would cheerfully do without you if we could: it grieves us to disturb you at dinner—but it is impossible to dispense with your society, now that we have had the honour of forming your acquaintance. But no one need know anything about it. And look you here, sir," he added, suddenly lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper, and drawing the prisoner partially aside; "just tip my friend Withers five guineas, and he'll leave those handcuffs that he's got with him, all snug at the bottom of his coat-pocket. Excuse me too for observing that I am not exactly above accepting the same little compliment for myself, as you might possibly suppose I am."

"You will let me keep all I have about me—or all I may get?" said Sycamore,—who, now that the bitterness of his arrest was past, began to recover his self-possession.

"You shall experience just such treatment, sir," answered Mr. Shadbolt, "as we should show our own brother if he got into trouble and we was charged with the business."

Sycamore drew out his purse, and handed five guineas to Mr. Withers, who was thereupon most graciously pleased to suffer his countenance to expand into a more amiable expression than it had hitherto worn; while Mr. Shadbolt, on receiving a similar gratuity, proclaimed his conviction that Mr. Sycamore was a regular gentleman and should be treated as such.

"Will you let me go into the next room for a few moments?" asked Sycamore hastily.

"Not if so be as there's a door on t'other side," responded Mr. Withers.

"There is not," answered Sycamore: "there is this door, and there is the one upon the landing——"

"But what do you want?" asked Wither sulkily.

"Never do you mind what the gentleman wants," said Shadbolt. "Wait an instant, sir."

Thereupon he skipped towards the door of communication in order to peep through the key-hole and ascertain whether there was a door or not at the further extremity of the adjoining room. But as he popped his head suddenly down, he caught the twinkling of an eye on the other side of the key-hole: then that eye was abruptly withdrawn—he could see into the next room—and he beheld a young gentleman rapidly retreating towards another young gentleman who sate at the table.

"Your friends have twigged you, sir, I am sorry to say," observed Mr. Shadbolt, turning away from the door and addressing himself to the prisoner. "They have been listening, sir; for I saw an eye—and where an eye can peep an ear can plant itself."

Mr. Sycamore gave utterance to an oath expressive of his bitter vexation and disappointment. The fact is, he had intended to take advantage of the generous offers just now made by the two young gentlemen. The forged bill for which he was arrested, was for five hundred pounds; and he had purposed to represent to those young gentlemen that he was in the custody of sheriffs'-officers for a debt to a similar amount—so that if he could manage to obtain that sum from them he would have a chance of hushing up the affair immediately on his arrival in London with the detectives. But this hope was now completely overthrown; and scarcely had Mr. Shadbolt announced to him that "his friends had twigged him," when he heard the bell down stairs ringing violently. It was the bell of the adjoining room; and the waiter was not very long in answering it, inasmuch as he had been nearly all the time upon the landing, with his own ear applied to the key-hole of the sitting-room where the above described scene with the officers had taken place.

"Our hats, waiter, immediately! our hats!" the two young gentlemen in the adjacent apartment were now heard to ejaculate: and then the words "swindler," "forger," "adventurer," "scoundrel," and other equally pleasing appellations were likewise wafted to the wretched Sycamore's ears.

"Good heaven, what an exposure!" moaned the wretched man, turning away towards the window.

The waiter entered to fetch the two young gentlemen's hats, which had been left in the sitting-room; and he relieved his own feelings by sparring for a moment like clock-work behind Mr. Sycamore's back, at the same time making signs to the two officers—as much as to imply that he knew it all, and that as he was now convinced he should never get a penny piece from Mr. Sycamore for waiting on him, he should very much like to inflict summary chastisement upon the scoundrel. Having performed this pantomime, he said gruffly, "Did you speak, sir?"

"Who? I? No!" ejaculated Sycamore, startled from his wretched reverie and turning abruptly round.

"Then you had ought to," returned the waiter:

and raising his voice to a higher key, he exclaimed, "You had ought to say what business you have—a swindling scoundrel like you—coming to a respectable hotel, giving your orders like a prince, robbing everybody, and not so much as paying the poor devils of servants which has run their legs off to wait upon you. A precious nice thing to get into the local papers amongst the Fashionable Intelligence:—'*The Hon. Talbot Sycamore removed on Wednesday last from the Royal Hotel at Ramsgate to his town house of Newgate.*' Dash my wig, such an Honourable!"—and the waiter in order to vent his indignant feelings upon something, dashed his white napkin frantically down upon the unoffending carpet.

Comforted by this procedure, he took up the two young gentlemen's hats, and stalked out of the room, leaving the door wide open.

"Let's go at once," said Sycamore; "or the whole hotel will be up in arms."

"I think you have a servant, sir?" said Mr. Shadbolt.

"Perdition take the servant!" rejoined Sycamore sharply. "Let him shift for himself."

The waiter was holding forth to the two young gentlemen in the adjacent apartment, on the impropriety of scoundrels in general and Mr. Sycamore in particular, taking up their quarters at first-rate hotels,—so that the culprit was enabled to slip out of the establishment, closely accompanied however by the two detectives. In the street they met the dapper groom; and he at once comprehended that something was the matter. It was impossible to avoid giving him a suitable explanation: whereupon he darted away,—thinking perhaps that it was impolitic for him to re-enter the hotel, as he might stand a chance of being given into custody as an aider and abettor of his master in the process of swindling which had been carried on. Neither did he deem it expedient to accompany his master to London; and thus he did indeed fulfil Mr. Sycamore's recommendation—that he should shift for himself.

Barely five minutes had elapsed after Sycamore's departure with the two detectives—and while the waiter was acquainting the barmaid and all the other domestics with the details of the explosion that had just occurred—when a telegraphic despatch was hurriedly brought into the hotel from the railway station. It contained simply these words:—"Give Sycamore and the groom into custody. Leave Mr. Ashton unmolested: he is innocent. I shall be down by the next train."

This was from the landlord of the hotel, who had gone up to London, where he had instituted inquiries with such rapidity and effect, as to be enabled to arrive at the conclusions contained in that telegraphic despatch. It was however too late to act upon it—for the hand of justice had already laid its grasp upon one of the scoundrels, and the other had decamped.

Christian Ashton entered the hotel at this conjuncture. He was speedily made acquainted with what had occurred; and the telegraphic despatch was shown to him. He was infinitely delighted thus to discover that his own reputation remained perfectly undamaged; and he proceeded to explain the circumstances under which he had withdrawn himself in the forenoon from Mr. Sycamore's employment, and how he had overheard at the tavern the intention on the part of Messrs. Shadbolt and Withers to arrest that individual. The bar-maid now understood wherefore our young hero had asked for his bill separately from Sycamore's account; and this circumstance, together with the promptitude exhibited by Christian in settling it, confirmed the favourable intimation forwarded by the landlord from London.

CHAPTER LXIV.

VERNER HOUSE.

When he had retired to his own chamber at night, after the exciting events of the stirring day through which he had passed, Christian Ashton reflected upon all those occurrences—and not the least on the mysterious adventure of which he had obtained an initiative glimpse in the neighbourhood of Sir John Steward's residence. As the reader is aware, our young hero's heart was engaged with an unalterable devotion to the charming Isabella Vincent; and therefore it was merely with a genuine compassion and a pure sympathy that he thought of the beauteous and afflicted Laura. He trembled on her behalf for more reasons than one: the character he had heard of Sir John Steward, and which seemed fully justified by the old libertine's gloating looks, was alone sufficient to fill him with such apprehensions: but in addition thereto, he by no means liked the appearance of Mrs. Oxenden. That she was exceedingly handsome, we have already said: but she had a certain bold and resolute look, fully indicating the firmness and perseverance with which she would prosecute any enterprise, even though a bad one. She had the thickly pencilled ebon brows and the fiery eyes which denote strong passions: the configuration of her countenance was essentially voluptuous. She was not a woman to inspire love by her beauty—only to excite passion: nor did she herself appear susceptible of the former in its chastest and purest sense—though on the other hand, she seemed fully capable of experiencing the latter with a glowing and devouring ardour. Between that old man of libertine character, and this woman of sternest purpose, the hapless Laura appeared in the eyes of Christian to be as helpless as a lamb between two wolves bent on its destruction.

The reader may have already gleaned a sufficiency of our hero's character, to be aware that it was marked by chivalrous magnanimity. His experiences of life were wondrously enlarged since we first beheld him seated with his amiable sister in the lodging at Mrs. Macauley's house in London. He had seen enough of the villanies of the world to fill him with a generous longing to baffle and frustrate them whensoever the opportunity should present itself; and apart from his own naturally noble impulses, he had not failed to profit by the example of Mr. Redcliffe. It is not therefore astonishing if Christian lay awake a considerable time, pondering all he had seen in the close vicinage of Verner House—and that he should also rack his brain for the means of affording Laura that assistance which he felt convinced she required. But sleep came over him ere his mind was settled to any positive course; and when he

awoke in the morning, he had to begin his meditations on that point all over again. He was equally uncertain how to act in respect to his own personal concerns—whether he should leave the hotel and take a cheap lodging, so that he might remain in Ramsgate for a few days in the hope that events might occur to render him useful to Laura—or whether he should remain at the hotel until the morrow and see what that day might bring forth. His doubts in this respect were however set at rest when he descended from his chamber: for the landlord requested him to step into his parlour—where he addressed him in the following manner:—

"I returned home too late last night, Mr. Ashton, to be enabled to have a word with you. You are aware of the mention I felt it my duty to make of you in the telegraphic despatch. As you may easily suppose, my first inquiry on reaching London yesterday afternoon, was at the banker's where the villain Sycamore pretended to have a considerable sum of money; and I need hardly tell you that his representations were entirely false. I thence proceeded to the hotel in Piccadilly; and there I learnt that the statement you had made me in respect to the mode of your introduction to Sycamore, and the short period of your acquaintance, was strictly correct. In short, I know you to be an honourable young gentleman; and I am even sorry that you should have thought it necessary to liquidate your own account at my hotel, inasmuch as it was incurred under the impression that it would be paid by your employer. I will not insult you by offering to return the money: but I beg that you will do me the favour to remain here as my guest for as long as it may suit you to stay in Ramsgate. Is there any necessity for your speedy departure?"

"On the contrary," replied Christian, "it suits me well enough to remain here for a few days; and as your proposal is so generously made, in the same friendly spirit do I accept it."

"Use the coffee room, therefore," said the landlord, "just as if it were your own; and I will take care that every attention shall be shown you. As for that villain Sycamore, he will be punished—and this is a source of satisfaction. Fortunately his boxes contain the greater portion of the goods which he obtained from the tradesmen in this town; and they shall all be returned to them."

"But your loss is a severe one?" remarked Christian.

The landlord shrugged his shoulders, and said "It is one of the risks which we must run in business."

Here the conversation ended; and our young hero proceeded to the coffee-room, where an excellent breakfast was served up to him,—the waiters displaying as much attention as if he were the best customer they ever had. There were several other gentlemen partaking of their morning meal at the time: but one especially attracted Christian's notice. He was about three-and-twenty years of age—tall, well made—and without being positively handsome, had a good-looking countenance characterised by manly frankness. He however seemed unhappy—or at least troubled in his mind—as might be discerned by the pensiveness of his air, which was however interrupted by occasional slight starts as if he were goaded by some sudden poignancy of feeling. He was handsomely dressed: his appearance was eminently genteel; and when he had occasion to address the waiter, it was with the well-bred air of the polished gentleman. Christian had not seen him at the hotel before this occasion; and he presently learnt, from some observation which he made to the waiter, that he had only arrived late on the previous evening.

After breakfast, Christian strolled out; and he soon found himself bending his way in the direction of Verner House,—which, as already stated, was about three miles distant from Ramsgate. He traversed the fields—he came in sight of the mansion—and then he stopped short, mentally ejaculating, "But what on earth can I do to assist this poor young lady?"

He knew very well that if he were seen lurking about the premises, suspicion would be excited; for his conduct on the preceding evening had more or less angered Mrs. Oxenden. If therefore it were imagined inside the dwelling that he entertained the purpose of assisting Laura in whatsoever way she might require a friendly succour, it would only have the effect of increasing the precautions doubtless already taken to keep her in safe custody. At least, so thought our hero: for he had made up his mind that she *was* under terrorism and coercion of some sort—an opinion which was natural enough after all he had seen on the previous day.

Having reflected for some time within himself, Christian determined to inspect the grounds amidst which Verner House was situated, so that if by any accident Laura should be walking out alone within the enclosure, he might address a few words to her and ascertain whether he could in any way serve her or not. At the same time he was careful to conduct this inspection with all suitable caution, so as not to be seen from the windows of the house. To observe such caution was not difficult, inasmuch as the kitchen garden was surrounded by a high wall—the paddock and orchard by palings of an almost equal altitude—and the adjacent meadows by thick hedges. Climbing up into a tree, which completely concealed him, Christian looked over into the grounds in the rear of the dwelling: he beheld extensive stabling premises—a garden well laid out, and having spacious conservatories—several horses in the paddock—and numerous domestics moving about. Thus everything indicated the wealth of Sir John Steward—while the handsome draperies of the windows formed a criterion of the sumptuousness with which the mansion was furnished. An hour passed—and still Christian sate up in the tree, completely concealed by its thick embowering foliage. His time was his own; and he thought he might as well spend it in working out a good purpose.

Presently he beheld Sir John Steward and Mrs. Oxenden issue forth from the mansion and walk slowly across a lawn which separated the kitchen garden from the back part of the premises. They were in deep and earnest discourse together. The old Baronet was clad in precisely the same way as on the previous evening—in his dressing-gown, his cap, and slippers. Mrs. Oxenden wore a white muslin wrapper, fastened up to the throat, and which displayed the fine symmetry of her shape to its fullest ad-

vantage. Her raven hair hung in heavy tresses, with a sort of studied negligence, upon her admirably sloping shoulders; and there was something majestic and stately in the carriage of her fine tall form, as well as resolute and determined in the gestures with which she gave impressiveness to her discourse. Christian was too far off to catch a syllable that was said, or even to hear the tones of their voices: but he had a keen power of vision—and this enabled him to discern that their conversation was of an earnest character. That it related to Laura, he had no doubt; and that it boded naught favourable to her happiness, he was equally certain.

For upwards of half-an-hour did the old Baronet and Mrs. Oxenden walk to and fro upon the lawn, thus discoursing. At the expiration of that interval the lady left the old man, and re-entered the dwelling. Sir John remained in the garden; and every now and then he rubbed his hands together, as if with a gloating satisfaction at some idea that was uppermost in his mind. In about twenty minutes two females issued from the mansion: one was immediately recognised by Christian to be the beautiful Laura—the other was a horrible-looking negress with great thick lips and a most repulsive aspect. The young lady was apparelled in a morning dress; but she had on her bonnet, as if she were going for a walk. This however might merely be on account of the heat of the sun: for it was now past noon, and its beams poured down with sultry strength. The instant she caught a glimpse of Sir John Steward, she shrank back; but the horrible-looking negress seized her roughly by the arm, and appeared to address her in threatening language. Such was our hero's indignation, that he was about to spring down from the tree, scale the garden wall, and bound forward to her assistance,—when he was suddenly struck by the rashness and folly of such a proceeding, inasmuch as he would be placing himself in a false position by an illegal trespass upon the Baronet's grounds. It was however difficult for him to exercise a sufficient degree of patience to keep him there as a mere beholder, in the midst of the dense foliage of that tree.

The negress, we have said, caught the young lady by the arm, and appeared to use threatening language towards her—whereat she seemed smitten with dismay; and she suffered the black woman to lead her along towards the Baronet, who was approaching across the grass-plat with his shuffling, shambling gait. He said something to her: Laura averted her countenance as if in mingled anguish and aversion—Sir John went on speaking—she slowly turned her eyes upon him again—she listened with a deepening attention—and then Christian saw the old man take her hand and continue his discourse. That hand of her's lingered in his: she appeared to listen with a deepening interest—but Christian was too far off to discern the precise expression of her countenance; though he thought that it indicated a painful seriousness. Slowly did Sir John Steward insinuate an arm round Laura's waist: for a few moments she did not appear to notice it—but as if all in an instant becoming aware that such was the case, she abruptly disengaged herself. Then the negress spoke and gesticulated vehemently—the Baronet made her a sign to be quiet—and he seemed to go on addressing Laura in a coaxing, cajoling strain. This much Christian judged from his gestures: but whether it were so or not, Laura suddenly interrupted him by clasping her hands and saying something with an air of the most touching appeal. The Baronet gave a brief response, and turned aside in one direction—while Laura and the negress, withdrawing in the other, re-entered the mansion.

A few minutes afterwards Mrs. Oxenden came forth and rejoined Sir John Steward. They had not been together many moments, when a footman in handsome livery accosted them and delivered some message. He withdrew—but shortly re-appeared, conducting a gentleman dressed in deep black, and who had the appearance of a clergyman—or, as a second thought suggested to Christian, of a Catholic priest, by certain peculiarities in his apparel. The footman retired; and the visitor in black remained for about ten minutes in conversation with Sir John Steward and Mrs. Oxenden. They then all three slowly entered the mansion together; and as another half-hour passed without the re-appearance of any of those whose proceedings Christian had been watching, he descended from the tree.

It was now two o'clock in the afternoon—and he knew not whether to retrace his way to Ramsgate, or to linger in that neighbourhood with the chance of seeing anything more that might throw the faintest light on what was going on within the precincts of Verner House. He was however fearful of being detected in that vicinage—in which case his presence might possibly do more harm than good to Laura's interests. He had less misgiving in respect to the intentions harboured towards her than he had previously entertained: that is to say, he no longer thought it was for an outrageously vile purpose that she had been brought thither, but that matrimonial views were entertained—or else why the presence of that gentleman in black, who was evidently a minister of religion of some denomination or another? He began to retrace his way towards the town, partially with the idea of acquainting the landlord of the hotel with all he had seen, and asking his advice and assistance; yet his mind was not altogether made up to the adoption of this step, inasmuch as he naturally reflected that the landlord had quite enough to do in attending to his own business without attending to that of others, and that he might moreover be reluctant to perform a hostile part towards a man of wealth and influence in the neighbourhood. For an instant Christian thought of boldly addressing himself to a magistrate: but it required only another moment's thought to make him aware that there was not sufficient ground for legal interference in any shape or way. In a word, our young hero could settle his mind to no decisive course of action; and yet he was determined not to abandon the enterprise in which he had embarked.

He entered Ramsgate: and as he was proceeding towards the hotel, he beheld a group of mountebanks exhibiting their antics in the market-place. Three or four, apparelled in a quaint costume, were mounted on high stilts—while a companion in plain clothes was beating a huge drum and running his lips rapidly along a set of pandean pipes conveniently thrust into his

buttoned-up waistcoat. This individual's head was thrown back in the most approved style adopted by those *artistes* who exercise their powers of harmony on that humble and unpretending instrument. Furiously did he beat the drum, and with most exemplary perseverance did he blow away at the mouth-organ. Christian was about to pass the group, when something peculiar in the appearance of the gentleman who played the drum and pandean pipes induced him to glance a second time towards that individual. And now Christian stopped short in perfect amazement, when he recognized in the mountebank-musician no less a personage than his lordship Baron Raggidbak, late Groom of the Stole to that illustrious Prince his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha!

Yes—there was his lordship beyond all possibility of doubt. Tall, lean, and lank—more hungry-looking than ever—bearded and moustached—and clad in a shabby suit that seemed to have been originally made for a person at least a foot shorter,—the ex-Groom of the Stole to the illustrious German Prince was beating away at the drum and running his mouth rapidly along the pandean pipes, as already described. What a vicissitude! what a fall had this great man experienced! Christian looked amongst the mountebanks, thinking it by no means improbable he might see the Grand Duke himself performing his antics on the summit of a pair of stilts, or standing on his head, or twirling a basin upon the top of a stick, or accomplishing any other feat of gymnastics or jugglery. But for the honour of the German petty sovereigns (if those mean trumpery fellows have any honour worth caring for) his Royal Highness of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was not in the mountebank category. Christian did not think it worth while to be recognised by Baron Raggidbak; and therefore when he had a

trifle recovered from his amazement, he was moving away. But the stilted mountebank who was especially charged with the duty of collecting the coin with which the public generosity was wont to recompense the authors of these splendid entertainments, had his eye upon Christian from the very first moment that he had halted near the group; and the fellow had at once singled him out as the likeliest spectator to drop a silver coin into the basin. He therefore strode after him in some such a manner as that which the fairy tale represents the ogre with the seven-league boots as adopting; and stooping down—apparently at the imminent risk of falling head foremost and breaking his neck—the mountebank balanced himself on one stilt and presented the basin. Christian dropped a shilling into it—whereat the mountebank was seized with such a violent ecstasy of delight that he whirled himself round on the one stilt, the other being stretched out behind him in a horizontal direction and skimming over the hats, caps, and bonnets of the spectators who happened to come within the range of this peculiar feat.

"You are a perfect gentleman, sir," said the mountebank, when his achievement was finished: and he bowed low to Christian as he thus spoke.

"If you think so," said our hero with a smile: "you may perhaps answer me a question or two—and I will drop another coin into your basin."

"As many answers as you like, sir," joyously responded the mountebank, "at that rate:"—and he bent more forward to hear what Christian had to say—placing his hands upon his knees, assuming a sort of squatting position in the air, but dodging the while to and fro or from side to side with little short steps of his stilts, so as to maintain his balance: for it requires but a very limited knowledge of the laws of equilibrium and gravitation to convince any one of our readers that a gentleman thus perched upon high stilts cannot very conveniently stand perfectly still for three moments at a time.

"Who is that person that plays your drum?" inquired Christian. "Never mind why I ask—and don't look round at him, as I do not wish him to see that I am speaking of him."

"He is a poor German devil that we picked up a few months back," replied the mountebank; "and it so happened that we wanted a person to play the drum and the organ——"

"The organ?" said Christian, inquiringly.

"Yes—the mouth-organ, to be sure!—and where is there a nobler instrument?" said the mountebank, with a transient air of indignation: but apparently recollecting that another shilling was at stake, he instantaneously recovered his good humour—and having cut a caper to relieve his feelings, he again bent down to Christian. "Yes," he continued, "we picked up that poor devil some months ago, and as our pardner which used to beat the drum and play the organ, had gone into a little temporary retirement—only six months at the mill, for mistaking another gentleman's pocket for his own during the bitter cold weather of March last, when a man was of course glad to put his hand anywheres to keep it warm——"

"Well, well," interrupted Christian; "you took this German to supply his place?"

"Exactly so, sir; and in all my life I never did see such a feller to eat whatever comes in his way, and to get blazing drunk whenever he has the opportunity. You should hear him in his cups—what gammon he talks about Grand Dukes and Grooms of the Stole, and so on; and he says too that he has been a Baron and was called 'my lord,' that he has dined with our Queen and sat hob-and-nob with Prince Halbert. Of course it's all lies——"

"And what name does he bear?" asked Christian, who did not think it worth while to inform the mountebank that so far from its being all false, it was perfectly consistent with truth.

"Name?" ejaculated the mountebank contemptuously: "you never heard such a name as he gave himself—but it was an uncommon true one, I can tell you, sir, when he came amongst us. What do you think of Raggidbak as a name to go to bed with?"

"A very strange one indeed," answered Christian: and having dropped the promised extra shilling into the basin, he hurried away; for he saw that Baron Raggidbak was looking towards him over the top of the mouth-organ. On regaining his hotel, our hero made some little alterations in his toilet, and at about five o'clock descended to the coffee-room to give orders in respect to his dinner. At the moment he entered the only person who was there was that tall handsome young gentleman of about three-and-twenty, whom he had seen at breakfast in the morning, and whose appearance had so much interested him. This individual was sitting at a table, on which his elbows rested, and his face was buried in his hands: he was evidently absorbed in the deepest thought—and Christian, judging from the melancholy air which he had observed in the morning, fancied that it was a reverie of no very pleasing nature. Our young hero sate down and took up a newspaper—when all of a sudden the interesting stranger at the other table smote his clenched fist upon the board, giving unconscious utterance to some ejaculation expressive of the agitated condition of his mind. It was evident that he had not noticed Christian's presence—or else that his mind was so completely abstracted he would have done the same if a dozen persons had been in the room. Suddenly perceiving our hero, his countenance became crimson—he felt deeply ashamed of himself—and he began to falter forth an apology for his singular behaviour.

"Pray do not consider any excuse necessary," interrupted Christian, with so much gentle kindness of manner that he at once made a favourable impression upon the stranger. "I truly regret," added our hero, "that you should have so much cause for affliction."

The stranger gave no immediate response—but surveyed Christian with the air of one who sought to ascertain whether he would make a friend who might merit his confidence, and who would accept it with a kind and sympathizing feeling: for his mind was no doubt in that state when such friendship would prove most truly welcome.

Christian comprehended what was thus passing in his thoughts; but he feared to be obtrusive, and therefore said nothing. By his looks however he seemed to invoke that confidence which the afflicted stranger was evidently anxious to impart.

There was something so frankly ingenuous in Ashton's countenance—something so nobly magnanimous in the expression of his fine dark eyes—that it was no wonder if the stranger should be thus attracted towards him. Every moment during which the silence lasted, the barriers of ceremony and cold formality appeared to be melting away; and at length the stranger said, "You have spoken kindly, sir: you will pardon me for intimating that I have a secret longing to know more of you."

"I will frankly confess," answered Christian, "that I have felt an interest in you: for though older than I by some three or four years, you are nevertheless too young to experience the heavy hand of affliction without exciting sympathy."

The stranger at once grasped our hero's hand,—announcing his name to be Edgar Beverley. Christian mentioned his own name; and with characteristic frankness went on to explain that he himself had known his sorrows, together with a twin-sister whom he dearly loved—but that after a temporary experience of the world's bitterness, fortune had so far smiled on them both as to place them in comparatively happy positions. Our hero furthermore intimated that he had been private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont and to the Grand Duke of Saxe-Stolburg-Quotha, as well as to the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles, whose murder was wrapped up in such profound mystery; and he concluded by giving Edgar Beverley a rapid outline of his adventures with Mr. Sycamore.

"Thank you, my new friend—for such you must permit me to call you—for your confidence," said Beverley: then after a pause, he added, "I likewise have a tale to tell—and I am yearning to unfold it to your ears: but not in this room where at any moment we may be intruded on by other guests at the hotel. We will have a private apartment and dine together."

Christian agreed: the bell was rung—the requirement was mentioned to the waiter, who at once led the way to a private sitting room. Dinner was ordered; and Edgar Beverley went on conversing on general topics: it was evident that he reserved his own history until after the repast, when they might sit together without being continuously interrupted by the entrance of the waiter. Christian found him to be a young man of cultivated intellect,—able to discourse on an infinite variety of topics—the lighter ones without descending to frivolity, the more serious ones without merging into levity or dogmatism. He gathered however from his discourse that he was a lieutenant in the army—that his regiment was stationed at Brighton—but that he was on leave of absence. The more our hero saw of him, the better he was pleased with his unaffected urbanity, his mild gentlemanly manners, and the generosity of the sentiments he uttered on those topics which were calculated to evolve the best traits of the disposition. But there was likewise a manliness of spirit—a suitable pride and a becoming dignity, in Edgar Beverley's character: so that it was evident he was a young man of the loftiest notions of honour and integrity. On the other hand, Christian Ashton himself proved equally agreeable to the lieutenant, and proportionately progressed in his new friend's favourable opinion.

Dinner was served up: it was somewhat hurriedly disposed of—for Lieutenant Beverley was evidently as anxious to commence his narrative as Christian Ashton was to hear it. The dessert was placed on the table; and when the waiter had withdrawn for good, the serious topic of the evening was entered upon.

CHAPTER LV.

EDGAR BEVERLEY.

"In what I am about to relate," began Edgar Beverley, "you will pardon me if I do not particularize names; as you will see by the nature of my history that it involves certain delicate matters; and should the results turn out contrary to my apprehensions—in a word, should the sad misgivings which haunt me prove unfounded, I should naturally regret having specially mentioned the names of individuals with disparagement. The reserve, therefore, which on this point I am about to maintain, must not be regarded as a want of confidence, but only as a proper and honourable precaution."

"Rest assured," answered Christian, "that I shall take this precaution on your part as another proof of those good qualities which I have already learnt to admire in you."

"Thanking you, my new friend, for your favourable opinion," said Beverley, "I will at once enter upon my tale. But it is necessary that I should commence with a few particulars relative to my parentage and my family. My father was the younger brother of a man of wealth and title: he was poor, being totally dependent on his commission as a captain in the same service to which I now belong; and he mortally offended all his relatives by wedding a young lady whose beauty and accomplishments constituted her only dower. Of that union I was the sole issue; and my mother died a few weeks after giving me birth. My father was long inconsolable for her loss—until at length he became sensible of his duty towards me, and reflected that as she had left behind her a pledge of her love, the infant ought now to engross all his care. And he became the fondest of parents to me. He obtained the rank of major a few years after my birth; and though his pay was limited, yet he contrived by the most rigid economy to give me a good education. On reaching the age of twelve, I was sent to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst,—my father bidding me keep it in mind that he had neither money nor interest to procure me a commission, and that I must therefore endeavour to obtain one by the requisite proficiency in my studies. I applied myself thereto with all possible assiduity; and at the age of sixteen I obtained an ensigncy in the ——th regiment of the line. Fortune and misfortune came upon me at the same instant: for on the very day that I read my name in the official gazette as an officer in the Queen's service, my poor father was stricken with paralysis, which in less than a fortnight proved fatal."

Here Edgar Beverley paused for upwards of an minute, during which he was visibly struggling against his emotions; and then he resumed his narrative in the following manner:—

"I have stated that my father, in contracting a

marriage with a portionless young lady, had offended all his relatives—but none more so than his elder brother, who vowed that he would never speak to him again; and that brother kept his word. But when my father was dead, my uncle appeared somewhat to relent; and he sent an invitation to me to visit him during the few weeks that were to elapse between the funeral and the time appointed for me to join my regiment. Now this uncle of mine was a bachelor—exceedingly rich—with the estates strictly entailed, so that I was his heir presumptive. Of course you understand that if he married and had male issue, I at once ceased to be his heir. But from certain circumstances which I do not choose specially to touch upon, he was not considered to be what is called a marrying man. Perhaps therefore, regarding me as his heir, he wished to unbend towards me—to make himself acquainted with me—and to atone somewhat for his long continued obduracy towards my poor father. Be all this as it may, he sent for me, as I tell you, to his town-mansion at the West End of London; and then, at the age of a little past sixteen, I beheld this uncle of mine for the first time. I could not help it—but I at once conceived towards him a feeling that bordered almost on aversion. Perhaps it was the recollection of his conduct towards my parents—perhaps it was in consequence of certain discreditable rumours which had reached my ears—perhaps it was in a measure connected with his unprepossessing looks: or it may be that all these three reasons entered into that feeling of aversion which I thus experienced. And he on his part conceived an equal antipathy towards me, which speedily manifested itself when he attempted to play the tyrant while affecting to give sound and useful advice. He authoritatively warned me against ever contracting what he denominated such a mad and improper marriage as that which had alienated my father from all his relatives; and when I somewhat indignantly requested my uncle not to asperse the memories of the dead, and to bear in mind that the lady whom he contemptuously spoke of was my own mother, he flew into a passion, ejaculating, 'By heaven, you have inherited all your father's self-will, obstinacy, and perverseness!'—From that day forth I saw that he disliked me: my visit to his residence was abridged; and when I was about to depart to reside elsewhere until the period arrived for joining my regiment, he said, 'I shall allow you one hundred a year for the present; and that in addition to your pay will keep you handsomely. Follow my advice in all things; and I will increase your allowance in proportion as I have proofs of your obedience: but disobey me in any single particular, and I withdraw the allowance altogether.'—I did not choose to irritate him more than I could help: but he doubtless saw by my manner that my spirit rebelled against this harsh and tyrannical treatment. I joined my regiment; and for three years my conduct appeared to give satisfaction to my uncle—for at the expiration of that time he purchased me a lieutenancy in another regiment, and doubled my original allowance: but he invited me no more to visit him."

Here Edgar Beverley again paused: but he shortly resumed his narrative in the following strain:—

"About six months ago a detachment of my regiment was ordered from Manchester, where it had been previously quartered, to Brighton. Not to render my tale longer than is absolutely necessary, I will at once proceed to observe that I had not been many days at Brighton, when one evening at a public ball I was struck with the extraordinary beauty of a young lady whom for the sake of distinction I shall call by the name of Louisa. At the moment my eyes first settled upon her, she was dancing with a gentleman unknown to me; and when the quadrille was finished, he handed her to her seat next to a very old gentleman whom I supposed to be her father. I know not exactly how it was, but on that particular evening I could not obtain any information concerning the young lady: for those who were acquainted with her, did not happen to fall in my way; and two or three whom I asked, had now seen her for the first time—as was the case with myself. Neither could I venture to solicit her hand for a dance, inasmuch as when I applied for the purpose to the Master of the Ceremonies, he at once assured me that it was useless, as to his certain knowledge she was engaged throughout the evening. He was then obliged to flit away to some other part of the room; and thus my curiosity still continued ungratified. It was no wonder that she should thus be engaged so deeply, and that her ivory tablets should be filled with the names of partners for even more dances than she was likely to figure in: for her beauty was of a most captivating nature—and instead of dancing myself, I watched her light sylphid form as it glided gracefully through the mazes of the quadrilles. On returning to my quarters, I could scarcely sleep for the remainder of the night,—so absorbed were my thoughts with the image of the fair one. On the following day, as I was walking in the afternoon along the King's Road, I beheld the young lady approaching from the opposite direction. She was leaning on the arm of that same old gentleman who was with her at the ball on the previous evening; and as I surveyed them both earnestly and attentively, yet without suffering them to perceive that I was thus marked in my gaze, I noticed that the young lady did not hang upon his arm with that sweet familiar confidence which a daughter exhibits towards a parent—but that there was a certain degree of timid reserve and even distant bashfulness or constraint in her demeanour towards him. As they passed, I heard him call her 'Louisa my dear girl;' and she, in answering his observation, addressed him as ——what name shall I use?—we will call him 'Mr. Maxwell;' for you remember that in my narrative I am using fictitious names."

"I bear that fully in mind," observed Christian. "Pray proceed."

"Well," continued Lieutenant Beverley, "I heard the young lady address the old gentleman as Mr. Maxwell; and a chill fell upon my heart—for it instantaneously struck me that he must either be her husband, or else that she was engaged to be married to him: or else, wherefore should he have addressed her so familiarly? I cannot explain to you the cruel feeling with which this thought inspired me. It was not that I was as yet completely infatuated with Louisa: it was rather a sentiment of profound compassion on behalf of a lovely young creature who I felt assured

had already been sacrificed, or else was about to be sacrificed, to a man old enough to be her grandfather. I presently turned that I might meet them again: but I did not see them any more that day. At length wandering away from the King's Road, I was walking in another part of Brighton, when in my distracted mood I came in somewhat rude contact against a lady who was just issuing forth from a linen-draper's shop. As a matter of course I lifted my cap and made the sincerest apologies. They were accepted with what appeared to be a degree of familiar courtesy that struck me as strange on the part of the lady whom I thus beheld for the first time. She seemed inclined to keep me in conversation—and yet with an air of so much politeness that it would have amounted to actual rudeness on my part to hurry at once away. Methought that her dark eyes were fixed upon me with a somewhat peculiar expression—a certain degree of languishing boldness, which gradually in my estimation assumed the expression of an overture. Do not think me vain, Mr. Ashton: I never was conceited—much less was I a boaster in respect to the other sex."

"Pray do not think it necessary to give me any such assurance," said Christian. "Doubtless this lady was smitten with your appearance: for if I understand you rightly, you were in your uniform —and the fair sex are ever inclined to be captivated by officers."

"I was in my undress-uniform," responded Edgar Beverley; "and I ought perhaps to have informed you that the lady of whom I am speaking was exceedingly handsome, but some few years older than myself. She was a very fine woman: but the longer I contemplated her, the more did her looks impress me with the conviction that she was not altogether as modestly or as virtuously inclined as she ought to have been. Had I chosen at that instant to have initiated a little affair of gallantry, I might have succeeded: but though I do not mean for an instant to affect that I am more immaculate than other young men upon the point, I certainly had no inclination for an amour at that time, as my thoughts were otherwise engaged. I therefore, after some little conversation, made my bow and walked away. On the following day, between two and three in the afternoon, I was passing along in the neighbourhood of the Pavilion, when I encountered this lady again; and her recognition of me was so pointed that I was compelled to stop and converse with her. She gave me to understand by her looks—as eloquently as looks could speak—that she wished our acquaintance to assume a more intimate footing: but handsome though she were, there was something about her which failed to inspire a feeling sufficient to induce me to avail myself of the opportunity to enter upon an amour. She did not mention who she was; nor at the time was she acquainted with my name. She gave me as much encouragement as a woman possibly could: but I affected not to perceive it. At length I observed that her countenance flushed with a sense of spite and mortification; and with a cold bow she passed on her way. A few minutes afterwards I had ceased to think of her,—all my thoughts being again concentrated on the image of the beautiful Louisa. That same evening I was engaged for a ball given at the house of a wealthy family dwelling at Brighton; and on being introduced to the drawing-room, my eyes speedily singled out that fair creature who was seated next to her aged companion whom we are calling Mr. Maxwell. Now I was resolved to make some inquiries concerning her; and on speaking to the lady of the house, was informed that the old gentleman who sate next to her was her brother-in-law, he having married her elder sister. You cannot imagine the relief which this intelligence imparted to my mind: nor can you conceive how happy I felt when in a few minutes I found myself introduced to Louisa Neville—which is the name by which I must now call her. I was her partner in the first quadrille: I danced with her three or four other sets in the course of that evening: I escorted her to the supper-room,—her old brother-in-law appearing to be pleased rather than otherwise by my attentions towards his wife's beautiful sister. I asked Miss Neville, in the course of the evening, how it happened that Mrs. Maxwell herself was not at the party; and she informed me that her sister had no taste for such gaiety—but that on the other hand Mr. Maxwell himself was exceedingly fond of society. On the following day I met Mr. Maxwell and Louisa out walking: I joined them—and in the course of conversation learnt that Mrs. Maxwell had that day gone to London on a visit to some friends, with whom she purposed to pass four or five weeks. During this interval I saw Mr. Maxwell and his sister-in-law nearly every day, and became more and more enamoured of the beautiful girl. On one occasion I happened to mention my uncle's name,—when it appeared that Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were exceedingly well acquainted with him: but it also transpired that Louisa knew him not, and had never seen him. I must here inform you, Mr. Ashton, of something I ought to have mentioned before,—which is, that my uncle does not bear the name of Beverley, he having adopted another name many years ago, by Royal permission, on account of inheriting a certain property from a distant male relative who expressed in his will a desire that this change of name should take place Thus it was not until I happened specifically to mention the fact of the old Baronet alluded to being my uncle, that Mr. Maxwell became aware of it. You must bear all this in mind, inasmuch as it has something to do with another part of the narrative."

"I shall not forget it," observed Christian. "Pray proceed: for your tale interests me much."

"My acquaintance with the beautiful Louisa and her brother-in-law had lasted about six weeks," continued Beverley, "when the latter, remarking that his wife was to return home from London in the course of that day, invited me to dinner in the evening. I joyfully accepted the engagement. I had not as yet visited Mr. Maxwell's residence: but now I was in hope to obtain a footing there. I had learnt that he was tolerably well off, and that he lived in genteel though by no means splendid style at a house in Kemp Town. Thither at six in the evening did I proceed; and on being ushered to the drawing-room, was cordially welcomed by Mr. Maxwell—who with all the uxorious pride of an old husband possessing a comparatively young and certainly very

handsome wife, hastened to present me to the lady herself. Conceive my astonishment, when, as my eyes fell upon her, I recognized the one whom I had twice previously encountered, and whose eloquent looks of passion had so unmistakably conveyed those overtures which I had not thought fit to accept. It was quite evident that Mrs. Maxwell had not previously suspected who the invited guest would prove to be: indeed, as I presently learnt, she had only returned from London just in time to dress for dinner—and I therefore concluded there had been no leisure for much discourse between herself, her husband, and her sister. She started for an instant on beholding me: but both of us recovered our self-possession the next moment—so quickly indeed, that there was nothing in the manner of either sufficiently striking to catch the observation of Mr. Maxwell and Louisa. Mrs. Maxwell received me as a perfect stranger—as one indeed whom she now beheld for the first time; and I of course treated her in a similar manner. Throughout the evening she was only coldly polite towards me; and her behaviour continued formally reserved until the very last—as if she merely tolerated me because her husband had happened to invite me, but that I was by no means a welcome guest. A woman, my dear Mr. Ashton, never forgives the mortifying humiliation to which a rejected overture subjects her; and Mrs. Maxwell was the very last of the sex to be propitiated on such a point. Besides, she saw that my attentions were devoted to her beautiful sister Louisa: and thus, though herself a married woman, she experienced the rage of jealousy after having vainly sought to ensnare me by her own charms. I saw that she exercised the completest empire over her old husband, who was uxorious, submissive, and even servile to a degree—but fond, infatuated, and thus wearing the chains of a willing slavery. Mrs. Maxwell being several years older than her sister, wielded a species of maternal authority over that sister,—who, as their parents had long been dead, naturally looked up to her nearest surviving relative with an almost filial respect. I likewise perceived that Louisa stood much in awe of her; and once or twice submitted to be rebuked, for some trifle or another, without manifesting the least rebellious spirit. I therefore sympathised profoundly with that amiable and beautiful creature who was but too evidently under the dominion of an imperious and tyrannically disposed sister. When I took my leave a little before eleven in the evening, I received no invitation to repeat my visit: for as Mrs. Maxwell gave no such encouragement, her grovelling old husband dared not of his own accord—while delicacy as well as terrorism forbade Louisa from doing that whence her relatives abstained."

Here Edgar Beverley paused for a few minutes, while Christian Ashton awaited with an increasing impatience for the continuation of the narrative. He longed to ask one or two questions, on account of certain vague and strange suspicions which had gradually been engendered in his mind and which were now floating there: but he restrained his curiosity—resolving thus to curb it until Edgar Beverley's tale should be completed.

"The next time that I beheld Louisa," he resumed, "she was walking with her sister and Mr. Maxwell. I made a movement as if to stop and converse with them: but they passed on—and I saw that it was Mrs. Maxwell who was the cause of my being treated with a coldness amounting to actual discourtesy. Not coldness nor discourtesy on sweet Louisa's part!—for she gave me one modest look of tenderness, in silent response to the quick glance of affection which I flung upon her. Weeks passed away; and though I frequently—indeed nearly every day met Louisa—she was always accompanied by her relatives; and they never stopped: but there was a secret voice within my soul, telling me that I was very far from being indifferent to the object of my own growing love; and I was continuously racking my brain for some opportunity of seeing her alone or of corresponding with her. At length I managed to bribe a servant-maid in the Maxwells' household; and she conveyed a letter to Louisa. It contained the avowal of my passion—that avowal which I had already so often made by my looks, but which was now for the first time revealed in language. Through the medium of the friendly domestic, I received an answer, couched in the most modest and delicate terms, but giving me to understand that my love was reciprocated. Frequent letters were now exchanged between us; and at length—also through the medium of the friendly maid—a secret interview was arranged. This took place in the garden at the back of the house at an early hour in the morning, before Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were up. Louisa, with tears in her eyes, assured me that she had suffered much on my account—for that her sister was always accusing her of exchanging significant looks with me whenever we happened to pass. Delicacy forbade me from explaining to Louisa the cause of Mrs. Maxwell's rancorous and unforgiving animosity against me: but I made the most solemn protestations of imperishable affection. In short, Mr. Ashton, I spoke as I believe all lovers do speak to the objects of their regard. I told her that I would write to my uncle and beseech his assent to our union—in which case she might act in total independence of her sister's imperious authority: but Louisa, timid and bashful, and trembling at the idea of flying openly in her sister's face, besought me to wait yet awhile, and trust to a favourable change in existing circumstances. I assented, on condition that she would suffer these meetings to be renewed as often as was possible; and I wrung from her a timidly and tremblingly uttered pledge to this effect. Again did weeks pass on; and we met frequently. Oh! the joy of those meetings, when from two fond hearts commingled the transfusing feelings of purest, holiest love!"

Edgar Beverley paused for upwards of a minute, and with a pensive air evidently dwelt upon the happiness of those interviews to which he had just alluded—a happiness the experience of which he no doubt feared must be regarded as belonging only to the past, and never to be resuscitated.

"My narrative is drawing to a close," he at length resumed. "But before I proceed with it, I ought to inform you that on several occasions during the months which had now flown by since I was first quartered in Brighton, I heard vague whispers to the prejudice of Mrs. Maxwell's character. It was stated that previous to her marriage, which had taken place some few years back, her conduct

had been characterized by something more than mere levity—that there was also something mysterious attached to her earlier history—and I remember that on one occasion the opinion was expressed that she had actually been the kept mistress of some very rich man, and that in order to obtain a position she had accepted the offer made to her by the infatuated and doating Maxwell. Whether these rumours were true or not, I was then unable to discover: at all events I was certain that never did the faintest breath of scandal sully the fair fame of the lovely and virtuous Louisa: for supposing that those reports *were* correct, Louisa must have been the inmate of a boarding-school at the time her sister was pursuing an equivocal path. I now take up the thread of my narrative, and will speedily bring it to a close. About a fortnight back I was seated with Louisa in a shady arbour in the garden, when we were suddenly surprised by the appearance of Mrs. Maxwell. Her countenance was pale with rage; and she stood gazing upon us with fierce looks,—unable however for the first few moments to give utterance to a word. Louisa was overwhelmed with terror; and I myself was not devoid of confusion. At length I recovered a manly firmness; and I told Mrs. Maxwell that I was devotedly attached to her sister—that my intentions were honourable—and that I was ready to fulfil them as soon as circumstances would permit. She seemed on the point of giving vent to ejaculations of rage, and to level the bitterest reproaches at her sister—when, as if struck by a sudden thought, she became all in a moment calm; and bidding Louisa retire into the house, she remained to converse with me. She coldly asked me what were my prospects? I replied, 'You know that I am the heir presumptive of a wealthy Baronet; and without further delay I will appeal to him for his assent to my marriage with your sister.'—She looked at me in a peculiar manner—a manner which I could not understand; and she said, 'If I had known the first day we met in the streets of Brighton, who you were, I should never, *never* have given you that encouragement which you coldly rejected, and which subjected me to the deepest mortification that a woman can possibly experience.'—This speech struck me as so strange that I stared at her in stupid amazement.—'It is of no use for you to continue thus playing a part,' she said: 'because you cannot deceive me. I know that from the very first you were aware who I was, and that therefore you rejected the advances which under other circumstances a gay and handsome young man would have willingly availed himself of when made by a woman who may flatter herself that she is not altogether deficient in personal beauty. I repeat that when first we encountered each other in the streets, I knew not who *you* were, but you have all along known *me;* though you seem to have been playing a part to make me imagine that you did not. Of what use was this proceeding on your part? If at the first you had told me candidly who *you* were, and that you meant to keep my secret not merely as a man of honour, but likewise through delicate consideration on behalf of my sister, think you that I should have regarded you with hate? No; on the contrary I should have been grateful; and most welcome would you have been at our house. But your chilling coldness towards me from the very first, your reserved and forced politeness, were intended to humiliate me, though you were careful to abstain from verbal expressions of contempt and scorn.'—You may conceive, Mr. Ashton, how infinite was my astonishment while Mrs. Maxwell was thus addressing me. I was stricken speechless—and I continued to gaze upon her with a degree of wonderment which she doubtless began to suspect was truly genuine. She now surveyed me with surprise in her turn; and at length she said, 'Is it possible that I am mistaken? do you really know nothing?'—and then she stopped short, as if fearful of making an admission in case I was really ignorant with regard to the points to which she was thus mysteriously alluding.—'On my soul, madam,' I exclaimed, 'you are speaking to me in the strangest enigmas; and all that you have said compels me to be explicit on certain points, delicate though they are to touch upon. You say that I was cold to you on the first two occasions that we met: but perhaps if my mind had not been full of the loveliness of one who was then a stranger to me, I should have gladly submitted to the influence of your charms. I will ask whether you did not see that I started with surprise on the day that Mr. Maxwell invited me to dine here, and when for the first time I learnt who you were?'—'Enough, Mr. Beverley,' interrupted Mrs. Maxwell; 'I have been labouring under a most extraordinary mistake: I have altogether misunderstood you: I have attributed to you motives which I now see you could not possibly have entertained. I must crave your forgiveness; for my conduct has been most ungenerous. Let us speak no more of the past: let us think only of the purpose that has brought you hither, and of the topic which all along ought to have most interested us.'—Mrs. Maxwell then invited me to enter the house and partake of breakfast. Her husband was both pleased and astonished when she introduced me into the parlour: but she contented herself with the simple observation that there had been some little misapprehension on her part with regard to me, and that it was now cleared up. Louisa was summoned down stairs; and she could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw me there, nor her ears when her sister repeated the same observation which she had made to her husband. In short, the happiness of Louisa and myself now seemed all but complete: for Mrs. Maxwell was as courteous and kind as she had formerly been cold and distant. I was utterly at a loss to account for all this: but I cared not to waste time in reflection upon it: I surrendered myself completely up to the bliss of Louisa's society and in being recognised as her accepted suitor."

Here Edgar Beverley stopped again for a few moments, and then proceeded as follows:—

"In the course of that day I had another private interview with Mrs. Maxwell: and she then requested me to be explicit with regard to my intentions. I said that I would write to my uncle that very day, and that as a proof of my honourable views I would show her the letter. She was perfectly satisfied, thanked me for the confidence I reposed in her, but did not decline my offer, as methought she might have done, to suffer the letter to pass through her hands. I went to my quarters

to write it; and now more forcibly than ever did I recollect my uncle's imperious injunctions against following in my late father's footsteps and marrying a penniless girl. But love has hope and faith amongst its elements——"

"It has," thought Christian Ashton to himself, as the image of the beauteous Isabella Vincent rose up in his mind.

"And therefore," continued Edgar Beverley, "I flattered myself that my uncle would be moved on my behalf when I assured him in my letter that my happiness was centred in that fair being, who, though without a fortune, was a model of loveliness, amiability, and virtue. When the letter was finished, I sent it in an envelope to Mrs. Maxwell, that she might peruse its contents and then despatch it to the post. You may be sure, Mr. Ashton, that I waited the reply with a considerable degree of suspense, although I endeavoured to persuade myself that it would prove favourable. The return of post brought me the answer: it was singularly brief and laconic—and was to the effect that my uncle had an attack of the gout, or he would have come personally to Brighton to see into the matter and explain his views; but that he had other means of instituting inquiries, and that in the course of a few days I should hear from him again. Within an hour after the receipt of this letter, a note was handed to me by my servant at my quarters: it was from Mrs. Maxwell, requesting that I would abstain from visiting at the house until I should hear from her again. This requisition struck me as singular, but did not fill me with despair. I remembered that Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell had been acquainted with my uncle: I thought therefore that they might have written to him by the same post which conveyed my own letter, and that they perhaps had received a reply in such a sense as to originate the request that was now conveyed to me. I persuaded myself that my uncle was taking time for reflection — or perhaps waiting to ascertain through some channel or another whether Louisa was in reality all I had represented, and therefore worthy of becoming my wife. I said to myself that if these conjectures were right, my uncle was sure to give a favourable response, because he could only hear everything that was calculated to enhance the amiable Louisa in his estimation; and I even thought he was acting a prudential part in taking time to make such inquiries, inasmuch as though he had known the Maxwells, yet he had never seen Louisa herself, as she was at school at the time her sister and her brother-in-law were acquainted with my uncle in London. Still I was somewhat restless and uneasy at being debarred the pleasure of visiting Louisa for the present; and I penned a note to her for the purpose of conveying comfort during a separation which I besought her to hope was only temporary. I did not however know precisely how to convey this note: but as I sauntered near the Maxwells' dwelling—taking care not to be seen from the windows—I met the friendly servant-maid. From her I learnt that in consequence of a letter received in the morning, Mrs. Maxwell had suddenly set off on a journey, and that it was not known whither she had gone. I was likewise told that Louisa was sitting with her old brother-in-law in the drawing-room; and he appeared, from what I could gather, to have been instructed to keep a watch over her movements. Moreover the day was a rainy one; and there was no pretext for Louisa to issue forth. The maid undertook to deliver my note; and I returned to the barracks, wondering what this sudden journey on Mrs. Maxwell's part could mean—but connecting it with my own love-affair. On reaching the barracks, I strolled into the mess-room, where four or five of my brother-officers were in conversation with a gentleman in plain clothes. This gentleman was an officer in the Guards, and had come down to Brighton on the previous day for a short trip. At the moment I entered, he was relating an anecdote, which speedily became vitally interesting to me.—'I was up just now at the railway-station,' he said, 'to make some inquiry relative to a lost carpet-bag; and while I was lounging there, waiting to see a train go off, I fell in with an old flame of mine. I knew her intimately some nine or ten years ago: she was a lovely creature then—she is a splendidly handsome woman still. She passed from my hands into the keeping of a rich old Baronet. Stop a moment, and I shall remember his name!'—He reflected for a few instants; and then suddenly recalling to mind the name which he sought, he mentioned that of my own uncle. My brother-officers laughingly informed him that he was thus speaking in the presence of the nephew of the old Baronet whom he had just mentioned; and he in a similar laughing mood exclaimed, 'Well, I am sure that Mr. Beverley, if he happens to know this lady, will admire his uncle's taste. Let me see: she married afterwards, and turned quite steady, I believe. Who was it that she married? Ah, I recollect! an old fellow with years enough to fit him to be her grandfather, but with some little property: and so she became Mrs. Maxwell.'—I should here observe that my love for Louisa had been kept altogether a secret from my brother-officers; and thus they neither knew how interested nor how pained I was by the startling disclosure that had just reached my ears. My endeavour to laugh and seem unconcerned was but a sickly one; and I sped to my own room, there to give way to my reflections. Could the tale be true?—but dared I doubt it? Did it not corroborate the whispers that I had already heard in respect to Mrs. Maxwell's character? and did it not fully account for her strange behaviour towards me while labouring under the idea that I all along knew of her former equivocal connexion with my uncle? Nor less did it account for the strange language in which she had addressed me on the morning when she had surprised Louisa and myself together in the garden. I also comprehended why she had so readily accepted my proposal to show her the letter that I was to pen to my uncle: she doubtless wished to be sure of the terms in which I should speak of herself, so that she might positively ascertain whether I was sincere in professing my ignorance of her antecedents. I was deeply grieved to think that Louisa was so closely connected with such a woman; and then I blamed myself for this feeling, inasmuch as I knew Louisa herself to be the most immaculate of beings. While pursuing my reflections, methought that Mrs. Maxwell's journey might now be explained; and I conjectured

that she had gone to confer personally with my uncle, who, I should observe, was at his country seat in this county where you and I, Mr. Ashton, now are."

"Proceed," said Christian impatiently: for all his former suspicions were now well nigh strengthened into complete confirmation.

"It will require not many details to complete my tale," resumed Edgar Beverley. "Three days ago I received a note from Mrs. Maxwell, dated from the house at Brighton, and therefore showing that she had returned home. It was to the effect that after mature consideration, and under all circumstances, she begged in the most positive manner to decline on her sister's behalf the proposals of marriage which I had made. The billet contained no more: it was thus cruelly concise and laconic. But scarcely had I read it, and while still labouring under the influence of the dreadful shock it occasioned, another letter was brought to me. This was from my uncle. It professed the deepest regard for my welfare, and went on to state that the inquiries he had instituted in respect to the matter that I had communicated to him, were so far from satisfactory he was compelled to put a firm negative upon the request I had made for his assent upon the point. He charged me not to write to him again on the same topic, under penalty of his serious displeasure; and he added that if I left Brighton with the intention of seeking a personal interview in the hope of inducing him to alter his decision, he should regard it as a downright act of rebellion against his authority, and would order his doors to be closed against me. Such was the letter I received; and I flew off like one frantic to the Maxwells' house to demand explanations. There I learnt that Mrs. Maxwell and Louisa had departed together at an

early hour that morning (the former had only returned from her journey on the preceding evening). Mr. Maxwell was at home: but he positively refused to see me. The servants knew not whither their mistress and Louisa had gone: but I was determined to find out and seek explanations. I thought that my uncle had been by some means prejudiced against Louisa; and yet if Mrs. Maxwell had really been to him, it did not seem natural to conclude that *she* would have been the person so prejudicing him against her own sister. There was a hideous mystery in it all; and I knew not what to conjecture. I flew to the railway-station: but no ladies answering the description of Mrs. Maxwell and Louisa had departed by any train that morning. An accident which I need not pause to describe, put me on their track: they had taken a vehicle to Hastings—and I was resolved to follow. Hurrying back to the barracks, I obtained leave of absence from the superior officer in command, and set off. I traced the two ladies to Hastings: thence they had departed in a post-chaise. I also took a post-chaise—and followed on their track. From the information I received along the road, it appeared evident that Mrs. Maxwell had anticipated pursuit on my part, and that she had exerted all her ingenuity to destroy the traces of her route. She had taken a circuitous one—she had frequently changed vehicles—and she had evidently bribed persons who could give information, and who *did* give it too for the bribes which I also lavished. To be brief, I succeeded in tracing Mrs. Maxwell and her sister as far as Canterbury; and there the clue was altogether lost. Bewildered what course to adopt—— But I need say no more: I came on to Ramsgate."

Edgar Beverley thus abruptly terminated his extraordinary narrative; and Christian at once exclaimed, "I will tell you why you came on to Ramsgate! You thought of obtaining an interview with your uncle—but you have suffered the whole of this day to pass, because you have hesitated and trembled—you have been haunted by misgivings, but bewildered by their vagueness and uncertainty——"

"Yes, yes—it is so!" ejaculated Beverley, with mingled amazement and suspense. "But how——"

"Because," interrupted Christian, speaking rapidly and excitedly, "by a remarkable series of incidents I have been placed in a position enabling me to throw much light upon that which is at present dark to your view."

"You?" cried Beverley, with a suspense that now reached to fever-point.

"Yes!—and to prove that it is so," continued our hero, "I will at once give you the right names of those whom you have introduced by fictitious ones—as well as that of your uncle whose name throughout your narrative you have not mentioned at all!"

"Good heavens, is this possible?" exclaimed Edgar, starting up from his seat.

"Yes," rejoined Christian: "judge for yourself! Your uncle is Sir John Steward—Mrs. Maxwell is Mrs. Oxenden—and the name of Louisa is a substitute for the real one of Laura."

"True!" cried Edgar in the wildest amazement. "But how, my dear friend—how——"

"Listen," interrupted Christian; "and I will tell you everything. But pray be calm and collected."

Our hero then proceeded to explain all those particulars which have been related to the reader, from the moment when he had seen the breaking-down of the carriage on the previous evening, to that when he descended from his hiding-place in the tree on the day of which we are writing. Edgar Beverley listened with mingled indignation and amazement; and scarcely had Christian finished, when the lieutenant snatched up his hat, exclaiming, "The foulest treachery is at work—but I will rush to Verner House—I will unmask the conspiracy—I will rescue my beloved Laura—and then let my vile uncle do his worst!"

"Stop!" said Christian, springing forward to catch Beverley by the arm: "you will ruin everything by your rashness! The door will be closed against you—it is now nine o'clock in the evening—you will not see Laura—but you will make her persecutors aware that you are here in the neighbourhood—and they may spirit her off to some other place in the dead of the night. I beseech you to be calm—if you value your happiness and that of the young lady——"

"Oh, you are indeed my friend!" exclaimed Beverley, struck by the force of Christian's words. "For heaven's sake advise me how to act!"

"I will," responded our hero: "sit down and let us deliberate coolly and collectedly. From what I have told you, it is tolerably evident that your uncle Sir John Steward contemplates marriage——"

"Yes: for it was a priest whom you saw," exclaimed Edgar; "and Laura is a Catholic. But pray proceed!" he added with feverish impatience.

"The only means," continued our hero, "will be for you to communicate with the young lady, and obtain information from her how she may be rescued."

"Yes, yes: that is indeed the best—the only means!" cried Edgar. "But how is it to be accomplished? how can a letter be conveyed to her? who will be the bearer of it?"

"Yes—how? who?" said Christian, reflectingly. "Oh, I have it!—the mountebank!"—and he sprang up in delight from his seat.

"What mean you?" inquired Edgar, with excited quickness.

"Remain here—patiently, if you can!—but at all events remain here!" exclaimed our hero; "and leave it to me!"—with which words he sped from the apartment.

But while bursting into the street to execute the object which he had in view, Christian Ashton little suspected that at this selfsame moment his beloved sister was passing through a painful ordeal,—which must be described in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER LXVI.

CHRISTINA'S ADVENTURES.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening: the Princess Indora and Christina Ashton were walk-

ing together in the garden attached to the villa at Bayswater. A long pause had followed some conversation on intellectual topics; her Highness fell into a reverie; and Christina was almost as soon absorbed in her own separate thoughts. At length Indora, suddenly arousing herself from her train of meditation, observed in a kind tone, "I am truly glad that your brother has obtained another situation: I hope he will be comfortable in it. But rest assured, my dear Christina, that if he had not succeeded in thus employing himself, I should have devised the means to do something for him."

"I know and deeply appreciate all your ladyship's goodness," answered our young and beautiful heroine. "You gave us both a signal proof of your generous sympathy on our behalf, when your ladyship bade me proffer a sum of money for Christian's use——"

"And he declined it," observed the Princess; "because he had been provident and had a pecuniary resource of his own. That circumstance raised him higher than ever in my estimation. I feel convinced that he will do well: and you have a right to be proud of such a brother."

"We are indeed devotedly attached to each other," responded Christina. "Being twins—our orphan condition likewise—the reliance which we had to place in each other——"

"I understand it all," said the Princess. "Those circumstances have combined to strengthen and enhance the love of brother and sister which naturally subsisted between you. And I am glad of this opportunity of giving you the assurance, my dear young friend, that should circumstances soon transpire to induce me to return to my native land, it shall be my care to place you in a position that will render you independent for the future."

Christina was melted to tears by this evidence of generosity and good feeling on the part of the Indian lady; and warmly but tremulously she expressed her gratitude. Almost immediately afterwards the Princess entered the house: but Christina lingered in the garden to ramble there a little while longer; for the evening was beautiful—and she was in one of those moods when she wished to be alone with her own thoughts. The reader will not be surprised if when thus alone the image of her beloved friend Zoe rose up in her mind; and that by a very natural association, it likewise conjured up Lord Octavian Meredith to her thoughts. It will be remembered that the young maiden had already so far analyzed her feelings as to be unable to repel the conviction that Octavian was not altogether indifferent to her: but she was ever doing her best and striving her hardest to expel his image from her mind. Indeed, she never contemplated it fixedly: the immaculate purity of her soul would not suffer her mental vision to dwell with passionate intentness upon that image under existing circumstances. Yet she could not altogether prevent it from often and often floating vaguely in her mind: for with all her innocence—with all her anxiety to martyrise her own feelings when she found them passing into a forbidden channel—she could not exercise a complete power over her volition.

Christina remained in the garden, as we have said, after the Princess had quitted it on the evening of which we are writing; and for nearly half-an-hour she was occupied with her thoughts. Presently—when near that fence which has already been so often mentioned as overlooking a contiguous field—she thought she heard a sudden rustling amongst a dense knot of evergreens on one side of the gravel-walk where her delicate feet were treading. For a moment she was startled by the circumstance: but the next instant recovering her self-possession, she conjectured it must have been the rush of a cat—for there was not a sufficient breeze thus to agitate the foliage. She thought to herself, as some tale recently told her by the Princess sprang up in her memory, that if she was in that eastern lady's native land, she would in a moment have fled wildly away from the spot, lest some monstrous reptile should suddenly fling forth its hideous coils around her, or lest some savage animal should spring forth upon her. She could not help thanking heaven for having made her the native of a land whose climate, though so much maligned, renders it impossible for such causes of terror to exist: but little suspected she for an instant that where no monstrous snake can conceal its slimy folds, and where no savage animal can hide itself in ambush, a human being with scarcely less treacherous intent may find a lurking place. And so it was on the present occasion: for scarcely had Christina turned to leave the spot where a sudden alarm had for an instant arrested her steps,—when she was pounced upon by a man who darted forth from amidst the evergreens. So abrupt was the occurrence—so frightfully quick did it seem to follow upon those ideas of the serpent and the wild beast which had just been flitting through her mind—that it overwhelmed her with terror; insomuch that the very cry which rose up to her lips, was checked at the moment it was about to burst forth—and she lost all consciousness.

Sudden as was that attack—suddenly too as she sank into a swoon—with an equal suddenness was she made aware, when startled back to life, that some violent altercation was taking place. She was inside a common cab: a man was seated next to her—a woman with a thick veil opposite. The vehicle had stopped; and the cabman was venting his abuse upon the coachman of another equipage. A glance from the window showed Christina that this scene was taking place close by the Oxford Street entrance to Hyde Park. It was doubtless the sudden shock which the cab sustained on coming into collision with the other vehicle, that had startled Christina back to consciousness. That other vehicle was a private carriage, the coachman of which was throwing the blame of the collision upon the cabman,—while the latter recriminated in a much coarser style; and with a horrible imprecation he demanded to know who was to pay him for his broken shaft? For the first few moments all this appeared to Christina to be nothing but a dream—an illusion which was more or less sustained by the duskiness of the hour and the obscurity which therefore prevailed inside the cab. But the conviction of the scene's reality soon struck her mind: the man was on her left hand—the veiled woman was opposite—the street lamps were glaring on either side—the altercation was taking place close by.

"Sit down, Miss!" said the woman vehemently, as Christina in wild affright was about to lower

one of the windows:—and it was with a foreign accent that this woman spoke.

"I insist upon being suffered to alight!" said Christina, with an another effort to lower the window—in which however she was baffled by the woman seizing her violently by both her wrists.

"The shaft is broken! what is to be done?" hastily said the man who was seated next to Christina, and who was the same that had captured her in the garden.

"The shaft broken?" echoed Madame Angelique—for she indeed it was into whose power our heroine had fallen, and who wore the veil to guard herself against future recognition. "Pray, my dear Miss——"

"Release me!—I insist upon being released!" screamed Christina: and the next instant one of her fair hands was dashed through the glass.

Her shriek thrilled forth: Madame Angelique—almost maddened by the dilemma in which she found herself placed by the collision of the two vehicles, and by the dread of exposure—seized our heroine by the throat, muttering, "Silence, girl!—or I will throttle you!"

The mingled terror and pain which the poor girl experienced, caused her to swoon off once more; and when for the second time she recovered her consciousness, she found that she was being lifted from a vehicle by a couple of female servants. The first impression which now seized upon her was that she was still in the power of her enemies; and with a scream she released herself from the hold which was upon her. But this hold was a friendly one: a voice which she recognised, gave her a kind assurance: for the maid-servant who had thus spoken to her was the daughter of that landlady who had originally recommended her as companion to Lady Octavian Meredith. Christina experienced a sudden sense of safety—but had no power of lucid recollection. Stupified by all that had occurred—and feeling as if her senses were again about to abandon her—unable, in a word, to bear up against the effects of this series of incidents through which she was hurried—she mechanically abandoned herself to the care of the two servant-maids, and was conducted into a house which she had not been enabled to recognise on account of the dimness which came over her vision. Such too was the confusion of her thoughts, that though she had recognised the voice of Jessie Giles, and knew it to be a friendly one, it did not at the instant strike her where she had known the girl before: but when placed upon a sofa in a handsomely-furnished room—when wine-and-water was proffered her, and the two domestics were doing all they could to revive her from that listless condition which bordered so closely upon unconsciousness—a light suddenly flashed in to the mind of our heroine. She knew where she was!—the apartment was indeed familiar enough to her: it was one of the elegantly-furnished parlours of Lord Octavian Meredith's residence. Then naturally enough the idea smote her that it was he who had caused her to be carried off; and shocked as well as horrified by the belief of such tremendous perfidy, she burst into tears.

"Let me go hence! let me depart!" she the next moment exclaimed, dashing away those tears, and becoming violently excited with mingled alarm and indignation. "Your vile master shall not keep me here!"—and she rushed to the door.

"For heaven's sake, Miss Ashton, compose yourself!" said Jessie Giles, springing after her. "You are mistaken!—it is his lordship who rescued you—and his carriage is ordered to wait to convey you home, wherever it may be."

Now another revulsion of feelings took place in the bosom of Christina; and she comprehended in a moment all the strength of the insulting suspicion to which she had given way towards Lord Octavian Meredith. She sank upon a seat; and pressing her hand to her brow, burst into another flood of tears.

"Do pray compose yourself, Miss!" repeated Jessie. "You must know that you are in safety here! But it is natural you should be frightened—for from what little his lordship said to us when the carriage stopped at the front door, you have been outrageously treated. Indeed, it was very fortunate our coachman *had* taken a drop too much and run against the cab—or else you might not have been delivered from the hands of those people."

"I hope you will not repeat to his lordship," said Christina earnestly, "the words which I uttered——I was half wild—I gave vent to anything which came into my head——"

"Here is his lordship!" said Jessie: and she at once withdrew from the apartment, followed by her fellow-servant.

It was simply from motives of respect that the women retired: for they had not the faintest idea that Christina would not for worlds have thus found herself alone with their master. She had not the power to stop those women: she was shocked at the thought of the insulting suspicion to which she had abandoned herself, and which contrasted so strikingly with the sense of gratitude which on the other hand she ought to have felt towards her deliverer. She could not even rise from her seat as Meredith advanced towards her, and in the gentlest tones of his musical voice inquired if she felt better? It was a perfect consternation of bewilderment that was upon her—a distressing sense of confused thoughts, and with an utter uncertainty what she ought to say or how she ought to act.

But one word of explanation ere we pursue the thread of our narrative. Meredith, who was returning home in his carriage when the collision took place,—he having been dining at his club,—thrust his head out of the window to put an end to the altercation by telling the cabman who he was and ordering his coachman at once to drive on. Then was heard the sound of the crashing glass of the cab-window, instantaneously followed by a shriek; and Meredith, convinced there was something wrong—though little expecting to meet Christina—sprang forth from the carriage. Several persons collected upon the spot; and Madame Angelique told them from the window that she was a tradeswoman of respectability, and that she was merely taking home a runaway apprentice. She thought the lie would serve her, as Christina had fainted and therefore could not contradict it. But Meredith insisted on investigating the matter further: he tore open the cab-door—he recognised Christina—and an ejaculation of amazement burst from his lips. To take her in his arms

and bear her to his own carriage, was the work of the next few moments,—during which Madame Angelique and her male accomplice thought it best to beat a retreat,—the infamous woman having hastily slipped a couple of sovereigns into the cabman's hand. The crowd had passed round towards the handsome carriage to which Christina was now consigned: no opposition was therefore offered to the flight of the Frenchwoman and her accomplice,—who, we may as well observe, was her own footman, dressed in plain clothes. Lord Octavian Meredith's equipage drove off; and the crowd remained to question the cabman as to the meaning of these proceedings: but he, apprehensive of unpleasant consequences on his own account, vowed and protested he knew nothing more than that he had been hailed a short way off by the party, and that the young girl had apparently stepped into the vehicle without any reluctance on her own side.

Meantime the young nobleman's equipage was rolling away towards the Regent's Park; and his arm supported the inanimate form of the beloved Christina. What unexpected happiness for the adoring Octavian! Would the reader believe us if we were to profess ignorance as to whether he imprinted a kiss upon her cheek?—it were contrary to all knowledge of human nature to suppose that he abstained. Yet though they were alone together inside the carriage, and she was unconscious of what was passing,—it was with the purest delicacy he sustained her inanimate form: he did not press it with passionate vehemence in his arms:—his love for the beauteous Christina was indeed of a holy character, apart from his position as the husband of another, which alone rendered that love unholy!

And now we may resume the thread of our narrative at the point where we interrupted it to give the preceding explanations. Christina and Lord Octavian were alone together in the apartment,—she seated as if transfixed upon the chair—he standing near her, bending slightly down, and breathing inquiries tenderly respectful, as to whether she felt better.

"My lord," she answered, slowly recovering her self-possession, "I have to thank you for the service you have rendered me. I cannot comprehend the meaning of the outrage which dragged me from my home: nor can I conceive who were its perpetrators. But that is of little consequence now, since I am indebted to your lordship for my safety."

"Rest assured, Miss Ashton," responded Meredith, hastening to set himself altogether right in her estimation with regard to one point which he felt might need an explanatory word, "that if I had known where you dwelt, I should have at once conveyed you thither: but I never knew—I was never told——and—and—I never dared to ask!"

"With a renewed expression of my thanks to your lordship," said Christina, rising from her seat, "I will now take my departure:"—then, as a sudden thought struck her, she added, "May I request that one of the domestics be desired to fetch a vehicle to take me to my home?"

"My carriage is at your service," replied Meredith, who comprehended the meaning of Christina's request. "Hesitate not to make use of it: for most solemnly do I pledge my word that I will not inquire of the domestics who are in attendance upon it, where you dwell."

Christina liked not the arrangement: but she dared not fling another insult at the young nobleman by rejecting it—which would have been tantamount to an expression of mistrust in respect to the pledge he had just given her. She therefore said with modest bashfulness, "I will avail myself of your lordship's kindness."

"O Christina!" suddenly exclaimed Meredith, carried completely away by his feelings of devoted love and ardent admiration, as he gazed upon the beautiful being who stood before him,—"wherefore thus cold and distant? wherefore so freezing in your manner? My God: will you not bestow one kind look upon me, Christina?"

"My lord," she said, with a calm dignity, "you will not ungenerously avail yourself of the painful and embarrassing position into which circumstances have thrown me——"

"O Christina, one word!—only one word!" he vehemently cried. "Is it a sin to love you? is it a crime to concentrate all my hopes of happiness in this world upon *one* idea—the idea that you may yet be my own adored and cherished wife?"

"My lord, I cannot—I will not listen to this language!" exclaimed Christina: "it is an insult to Zoe—an insult to myself!"—and she moved towards the door.

"Now," cried Meredith, "if you depart in anger, you will leave me so truly wretched that I shall do something desperate! Yes—by heaven, Christina——"

"Oh, this threat which you have held out before!" were the wildly uttered words that thrilled from Christina's lips: and she pressed her hand in anguish and bewilderment to her brow.

"Christina, I am not indifferent to you," exclaimed Octavian, in a voice of exultant joy: "tell me, tell me that I am not indifferent!—tell me that you will live for me, as I am living for you——for *she* cannot live! Oh, speak to me!—for God's sake speak to me!"

He sank at her feet—he seized one of her hands—the other was pressed against her brow: he was about to convey the former to his lips—but with a sudden and vehement effort she snatched it from him—and the next instant the door closed behind her. Meredith dared not follow: he felt all in a moment that it would indeed be flagrantly insulting to the pure mind of Christina, if he were thus far to forget himself. He sank upon a seat—buried his countenance in his hands—and gave way to his agitated reflections.

Meanwhile Miss Ashton had passed out into the hall, where she found Jessie and the other maid-servant. Her ears caught no following footsteps; and she therefore comprehended that the delicacy of Meredith's feelings had prevailed over the strength of his passion. She hesitated not to linger for a few moments in the hall, while Jessie Giles hastened to fetch one of her own bonnets and shawls to lend the young lady. Then—having in the meantime decided *not* to avail herself of the carriage, for fear that in some insensate moment Octavian should forget the pledge which he had given—she hastened away on foot. She was soon overtaken by an empty cab, which she entered;

and in a little less than an hour, reached the villa at Bayswater in safety.

There she acquainted the Princess, who had been very uneasy at her sudden disappearance, with the particulars of the outrage which had been perpetrated against her; and all that she omitted from the tale, was that rapid but exciting scene with Lord Octavian Meredith which we have just been describing. Indora gathered enough from what Christina said, to convince her that the Frenchwoman could be none other than Madame Angelique: but she did not intimate that she had any knowledge of that disreputable person. Deeply indignant was the Princess at the treatment which her young friend had sustained: but she was totally at a loss to conceive what could be the motive of the abduction, unless it were to purvey some fresh victim to the lusts of Madame Angelique's patrons. Christina retired at once to her chamber,—where she was most kindly ministered unto by the Princess herself, who watched by her side until sleep at length closed the young maiden's eyes.

There was one person beneath that roof who understood full well what the outrage meant, and who inwardly deplored its failure,—but who outwardly testified sympathy on behalf of our heroine. This was Sagoonah.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE SUPPER-EATER.

THE scene now changes. On that same evening of which we are writing, a masked ball took place at Buckingham Palace. The invitations, which were most numerous, had been issued to all the principal members of the aristocracy, male and female, and to the most distinguished persons of the fashionable world. As a matter of course all the preparations were of the most splendid and sumptuous description: for Royalty has got nothing to do but to dip its hand into the public purse which hard-worked and severely-taxed Industry is forced to keep continuously filled, in order to procure all imaginable pleasures for itself, and to entertain its friends, its flatterers, and its hangers-on.

The greater portion of the company appeared in fancy-costume: but there were several—chiefly the highest personages, male and female, of the aristocracy—who were apparelled in their usual manner. Amongst those present was the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, who had again run over to England (at the public expense, be it well understood) to visit his illustrious relative; and in order that this faithful chronicle of events may omit no detail calculated to prove interesting to the reader, it must be added that his Royal Highness did actually and veritably wear a new uniform upon the occasion. Little did he suspect, while mingling in the gaieties of Buckingham Palace, that his late Groom of the Stole had on that very same day been seen by his late English secretary so industriously though somewhat ignominiously employed in beating a drum and running his lips along the tubes of a mouth-organ. There too, amidst that company, was the Duke of Marchmont, who was glad to seek in any scene of excitement a relief from the vague but painful apprehensions which haunted him in respect to the Princess Indora. In respect to the Queen and Prince Albert, the newspapers of the following day assured their readers that her Majesty never appeared in better spirits, and that her illustrious consort was observed to be in the enjoyment of admirable health,—which piece of intelligence no doubt afforded the highest satisfaction at all the breakfast tables where the journals aforesaid were perused on the morning after this grand entertainment.

But for the masked ball itself. All those who wore fancy-costume, were bound to maintain their *incognito* until two o'clock in the morning, so that there might be no relaxation of the merriment and gaiety until such time as all the wit and humour of the masked unknowns might be exhausted! Even this length of time that was thus prescribed, was founded on the calculation that the wit and humour of the aristocratic assemblage would last for several hours: so that when the average dulness of the aristocratic intellect is taken into account, it becomes quite clear that the patrician orders possess an enviable facility of amusing themselves.

Now, it must be understood that the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had come over to England with precisely the same retinue—the illustrious Raggidbak excepted — that he had brought with him on the previous occasion: but upon some private understanding to which he had come with his relative the Prince, the Grand Duke had introduced none of his precious horde at the masked ball of which we are writing. Therefore Count Wronki, the Lord Steward — the Chevalier Gumbinnen, the Lord Chamberlain — General Himmelspinken, the Master of the Horse — Herr Hombogh, the Lord Privy Seal—the Chevalier Kadger, Chief Equerry—Count Frumpenhausen, the Gold Stick —and Baron Farthenless, the Privy Purse, had all been left at Mivart's Hotel to play at dominoes for halfpence, or to rack their brains for the means of procuring some more substantial recreation. Deeply indignant were these great men at what they conceived to be the slight put upon them; and they presently took counsel together to see whether they could possibly indemnify themselves for their exclusion from the gilded saloons of British Royalty. All of a sudden a luminous idea struck the Chevalier Kadger: and having communicated it to his worthy compeers, it was unanimously voted that he should forthwith put it into execution. The Chevalier was about to set forth for the purpose, when he recollected that he should require a cab to take him in haste to Buckingham Palace, and bring him back again to Mivart's Hotel to communicate the result of his mission. Two shillings at the least would be the required fare; and this amount, after some little delay, was scraped together in halfpence from the pockets of those illustrious German noblemen and gentlemen. But when the Chevalier Kadger had departed, strange misgivings sprang up in the breasts of those whom he had left behind, lest he should merely drop into the nearest public-house, drink and smoke out the large funds confided to him for a special purpose, and then come back to assure them with all the impudence in the world that he

had been to the Palace but had failed in the accomplishment of his mission. However, there was now no help for it but to wait; and therefore, by way of a little pastime for the next hour or so, those amiable Germans sustained an incessant quarrel amongst themselves. But the result of the proceeding showed that a nicer sense of honour dwelt in the breast of the Chevalier Kadger than his friends gave him credit for: inasmuch as at the expiration of about an hour and a half, he re-appeared with a face that was very red and very radiant. The redness arose from a strong glass of brandy-and-water of which he had partaken in the servants' hall at Buckingham Palace; and the radiancy was derived from the complete success which had crowned his mission: so that after all, the Chevalier's companions found they had wrongfully suspected their upright comrade, and that he had *not* turned into the nearest public-house to drink and smoke out the two shillings accumulated in halfpence.

We now return to Buckingham Palace itself. It was verging towards midnight; and the doors of the refreshment rooms had been thrown open for those who thought fit to avail themselves of the viands and the wines, the fruits and the liqueurs, so profusely set out upon the tables. It was however deemed too early for a general influx of the company to these rooms; and but few domestics remained there in attendance. The head-butler was nevertheless at his post near the sideboard; and instead of lounging there, he stood statue-like with that prim formality which had become habitual. Presently a solitary guest, whose form and countenance were completely concealed by a long flowing domino, strolled in a leisurely manner into the refreshment-room — surveyed the profusely covered tables through a small opening in his hood —and then seating himself, began paying his respects to cold chicken and ham. The butler at once let fly the cork of a bottle of champagne, which he placed upon the table near the solitary supper-eater; and the contents of that bottle speedily disappeared down the supper-eater's throat. But it could scarcely be a matter of surprise that he required so considerable a quantity of wine, inasmuch as it had to wash down a proportionate amount of food: for it was no ordinary supper of which this gentleman had partaken. He kept his hood all the time over his head, and as much over his countenance too as the process of eating and drinking would permit: but this circumstance was no source of marvel to the butler, inasmuch as he knew that the masques were to preserve their *incognito* until a prescribed hour; — and with this knowledge likewise, the other domestics in attendance abstained, with a becoming delicacy, from standing anywhere in front of the supper-eater, so that they might not have the appearance of being inspired by curiosity to ascertain who he was. Having partaken of a copious repast, emptied the champagne-bottle, and finished off with a few glasses of sherry and port, the gentleman in the domino issued from the room.

About twenty minutes elapsed, during which a few other guests strolled in to partake of wine or lemonade, but of nothing more substantial; and the butler was still maintaining his post at the sideboard, when he was recalled from a temporary fit of abstraction to the fact that the identical domino of the copious supper-eater was again introducing itself to his visual perception. The worthy butler of course thought that it could be nothing more than the mere curiosity of an idle lounger strolling in to see how things were progressing in the refreshment-room: but scarcely could that same butler believe his own eyes, when he saw the domino sit down quietly at the table, and commence a vigorous attack upon the viands nearest. It required no small circumstance to shake the butler from the equillibrium of his prim formal dignity: but at this spectacle, which comprised the rapid disappearance of a savoury pie, he certainly *did* look aghast. However, he had his duty to perform; and when regaining his self-possession, he lost no time in accomplishing it. Another bottle of champagne was accordingly drawn and placed on the table for the behoof of the supper-eater. The meal on this occasion was not less copious than the former one, either in respect to solids or fluids; and having, as the butler thought, not merely appeased but most outrageously gorged his appetite, the domino departed from the refreshment-room.

Three or four other guests almost immediately made their appearance; and thus the attendant domestics had no opportunity to give verbal expression amongst themselves to the wonder which they did not the less experience at the gastronomic feat achieved by the domino. At length, however, the room was once more empty; and the butler was just marvelling within himself whether the great supper-eater felt comfortable in the condition of a gorged boa-constrictor—when his eyes settled on the same identical domino once more!

"Surely," thought the butler to himself, "he is never coming for a third supper?"—and the attendant domestics exchanged rapid glances amongst themselves with a similar significancy.

But the domino in question *had* returned for the most substantial of purposes. Down he sate—deep was the incision which his knife made into the breast of a superb capon—ham and tongue from neighbouring dishes found their way to his plate—and when the champagne was placed by his side, he quaffed glass after glass with a rapidity and a zest which seemed in perfect keeping with the gigantic magnitude of his appetite. The butler was astounded: he stared at the brilliant chandelier pendant in the centre of the room, to convince himself that he was broad awake—but he could not quite succeed in coming to a conclusion on the point; and still therefore he had a vague idea that he must have been dozing and dreaming—an impression which lasted for the next twenty minutes that followed the departure of the supper-eater from the room.

The guests now began to make their appearance in greater numbers; and some of them sate down at table. The butler became so occupied that his thoughts ceased gradually to dwell with so much intentness upon the incidents we have been relating—until all of a sudden they were again concentrated on the same point, and with a more powerful intensity than ever, on beholding the re-appearance of the particular domino.

"Good heavens!" thought the butler to himself, "is it possible that he is coming for a fourth supper? No—it cannot be! It is a downright physical impossibility! No human creature

could have a capacity for such an inordinate amount of food!"

The worthy butler was however wrong: for down sate the domino—again an inroad was commenced upon the viands—another bottle of champagne was done ample justice to. A vague terror stole over the butler: childhood's stories of voracious ghouls came back to his memory—he felt ill at ease—and yet he dared not betray what he had experienced.

"If," he said to himself, "he had now come just to taste the jelly, the whipped cream, the blanc-mange, or some trifle of that sort, one might possibly understand it: but to think that he should now, on his fourth appearance, sit down to devour the best half of that perigord-pie, is something unnatural to a degree. And then too the wine! It is quite clear that when he gets up from his seat, he will reel about in a terrible state of intoxication."

But the supper-eater did nothing of the sort. When a repast quite as copious as any of the preceding ones, had been disposed of, the domino took his departure with an admirable steadiness of gait: so that it seemed as if four bottles of champagne and at least two of sherry and port, to say nothing of a few glasses of liqueur, had produced not the slightest effect upon the brain of that extraordinary unknown. As for the attendant domestics—they would have been almost as much confounded as the butler himself, were it not that the nature of their duties kept him in a more vital state of calamity.

The guests were now crowding more and more to the refreshment room; and the process of eating and drinking without taking off their masks or throwing back the hoods of their dominoes, gave rise to much gaiety and merriment—yet all partially subdued by that well-bred fastidiousness which keeps down laughter to a low key in the saloons of aristocracy or within the walls of Royalty's dwelling. Nevertheless, there was quite sufficient animation to wean the butler away from the unpleasant reflections which had been passing in his mind,—until the unfortunate man was destined to receive an almost overpowing shock on beholding the domino make his fifth appearance!

"If he is going to sit down and devour another supper," said the unfortunate and bewildered butler to himself, "I shall know that I am a madman—that I am haunted by delusions—and for fear lest I should do any body a mischief, I will rush off to Bedlam, knock at the door, and insist upon being taken in."

Yet though the domino had come back for a fifth repast, the butler did not carry out his threat of self-immolation at the shrine of Lunacy. But for some minutes he remained transfixed in blank dismay, like one who was gazing upon an apparition from the dead. He even forgot to place more champagne upon the table, until reminded of his duty by his deputy, who was present. The butler gasped as if about to make some observation but was unable to give utterance to it: and then he proceeded to draw another bottle of champagne. But now a thought struck him.

"He surely would like a bottle of burgundy," he said to himself, "after so much champagne?"

And this idea was immediately followed by another. If the butler could but obtain a glimpse of the astounding supper-eater's features, it would be a relief to his mind to ascertain that it was really a human face which possessed the organ that took in so huge a quantity of sustenance. The butler accordingly proceeded in person to where the supper-eater was seated; and bending down—but not without a certain degree of apprehension, lest he should catch a glimpse of something frightful—he said, "I beg your pardon, sir—my lord—your Grace"—(for he did not of course know which appellation was right)—"but I thought perhaps a little burgundy might now be agreeable."

"Champagne!" was the single word which came from the supper-eater's lips: it was sternly pronounced—and at the same moment the butler caught a glimpse of a very fierce moustache through the opening in the domino.

Abashed and dismayed, the worthy functionary returned to the sideboard and despatched the champagne to the voracious domino. It was soon disposed of; and the repast devoured upon this occasion, was, if anything, more copious than the preceding ones. The domino then withdrew, walking as steadily as if he had only been drinking water, and *not* tumbling down dead with apoplexy ere he reached the door—as the astounded butler thought that he assuredly must. He disappeared from the view: and a prolonged sigh emanated from the heart of the miserable butler.

It was now about half-past one o'clock; and the company quitted the refreshment room to return into the other apartments, to hold themselves in readiness for the general unmasking that was shortly to take place. Once more was the butler left in that room with only the attendant domestics. But he could not keep his eyes away from the gilded portals; and though every instant he really expected to behold the re-appearance of the unconscionable supper-eater,—yet he endeavoured to persuade himself that such an event was beyond the limits of all human possibility. At length some one did appear—but not the domino: it was Prince Albert.

"Well," said his Royal Highness to the butler, "has everything gone off well?—have the company enjoyed themselves?"

"Admirably, may it please your Royal Highness," responded the butler, with a profound bow.

"I am glad of that," said the Prince, glancing towards the supper-eater. "I am desirous that on such occasions all restraint should be thrown off, and that her Majesty's guests should do ample justice to that which is provided for them."

"I can assure your Royal Highness," responded the butler, "that the most ample justice has been done—especially by one——"

"Ah!" said the Prince, "I am glad of it!"—then glancing at the butler, he thought he beheld something strange in his look: and he observed, "But about this one to whom you specially alluded?"

"May your Royal Highness forgive me if I am really mad," rejoined the butler: "but as I live, there is one guest, wearing a domino, who has eaten three fowls, a pigeon-pie, three parts of a perigord-pie, and cleared six dishes of ham and tongue. He has drunk five bottles of champagne—about three of sherry and port—and not less than a couple of dozen glasses of liqueur."

"Ridiculous!" ejaculated the Prince: and confusion was mingled with sternness in his looks—for he knew not whether to think that the butler had really gone mad, or that he was tipsy and therefore forgetting himself.

"I can assure your Royal Highness," said the unfortunate man, "that I am only dealing with facts. The personage alluded to ate and drank all I have enumerated——And here he is again!"

Yes—sure enough, there was the identical domino gliding into the room: but when just about to seat himself at table, he caught sight of Prince Albert—and appearing to stand aghast for a moment, he made for the door. His Royal Highness was instantaneously seized with the conviction that there was something wrong; and hastening forward, he caught the domino by the arm—not rudely, but with sufficient force to detain him. At that same instant the Queen made her appearance on the spacious landing outside,—accompanied by the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and attended by several gentlemen and ladies of her household. A piteous groan came from the lips of the domino; and he fell upon his knees. The Queen was seized with amazement; and she mechanically took her husband's arm, as if for protection; for the idea of some contemplated but discovered outrage flashed through her mind. The hood fell back from the head of the kneeling culprit; and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha exclaimed in astonishment, "It is Count Frumpenhausen—my Gold Stick!"

Prince Albert at once saw that his illustrious relative's functionary had some tale to tell which would redound little to the credit of either himself or his ducal master; and he was therefore anxious to avoid anything that savoured of exposure in the presence of the company. Hastily making some excuse, he bade Count Frumpenhausen rise from his knees and follow him to a

private apartment—a request which the discomfitted Gold Stick obeyed with considerable alacrity; for he felt by no means comfortable with so many eyes fixed wonderingly and scrutinizingly upon him. The Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha likewise accompanied the Prince; and in a few minutes the three were alone together in another apartment. Then Count Frumpenhausen made a clean breast of it and revealed everything. It appeared that a German valet who had attended Prince Albert to this country when he came to espouse the British Queen, was a near relative of the Chevalier Kadger; and when the Grand Duke's retinue were deliberating at Mivart's Hotel how they should indemnify themselves for their exclusion from the Palace, the Chevalier had resolved to seek the counsel and succour of his relative the valet: for he had an idea floating in his ingenious mind that through such assistance himself and his fellow-retainers in the ducal service might at least obtain a substantial supper within the palace-walls. He accordingly sped to his kinsman, who at first expressed his utter inability to do anything for him: but he presently recollected that a guest who had been seized with a sudden indisposition, had departed privately, leaving his domino behind him in an ante-room to which he had retired on first experiencing that sickness. The valet procured the domino, and gave it to the Chevalier Kadger,—strictly enjoining him to use it for himself alone, and by no means to transfer it to any of his comrades. But the Chevalier was resolved to prove faithful in every respect to his fellow-retainers; and on his return to Mivart's, they all sped off on foot together to Buckingham Palace. Being known as the Grand Duke's retainers, they easily obtained admission to an ante-chamber, while the Chevalier Kadger kept the domino compactly folded under his coat. When the ante-chamber was gained, he put on the domino, and had no difficulty in gliding into the saloons where the company were assembled: but he had a keen nose for the refreshments, and speedily making his way to the supper-room, he banqueted to his heart's content. The second wearer of the domino was Count Wronki, the Duke's Lord Steward: the third was the Chevalier Gumbinnen, the Duke's Lord Chamberlain: the fourth was General Himmelspinken, the Master of the Horse: the fifth was Herr Humbogh, the ducal Privy Seal; and the sixth, as the reader is aware, was the Count Frumpenhausen, the Gold Stick. But this respectable individual had failed to obtain the supper on account of the most inopportune presence of the Prince at the time in the refreshment-room; while Baron Farthenless, who was to have been the last wearer of the universal domino, was waiting in hungry expectation until his fellow-retainer Frumpenhausen should return to the ante-room to consign the disguising garment to the said Baron's shoulders.

Such was the revelation made to Prince Albert and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Both were exceedingly irate: but Frumpenhausen promised never to offend again; and it was found more convenient to bestow pardon upon him than by expulsion from his ducal master's service, to send him adrift in the world to tell the tale of the domino and the suppers. On their way back to Mivart's, Count Frumpenhausen and Baron Farthenless were exceedingly dejected, miserable, and surly—a state of mind which was by no means mitigated by listening to the complacent terms in which the others eulogized the succulent repast of which they had so luxuriously partaken.

We have said that the Duke of Marchmont was a guest at the palace on this occasion: but he departed long before the *denouement* of the adventure of the hungry Germans. Indeed, it was scarcely midnight when the Duke stole away from the midst of the brilliant assembly; and entering his carriage, ordered the coachman to drive to the beginning of the street in which Madame Angelique's establishment was situated. His Grace was aware that on this particular evening Christina Ashton was to be carried off; and he was deeply anxious to know the result. It was however no part of the infamous Frenchwoman's plan to take Christina to her own house: she feared that it might be too dangerous—and hence the concealment of her features with a thick veil, to avoid recognition on the part of the young damsel at any future time. She had accordingly made an arrangement with the keeper of another den of infamy, but one which was on a far less splendid scale than her own, to receive Christina—to keep her in close custody—and to have her ruin effected, so that under the imperious pressure of circumstances she might resign herself to a life of pollution, and thereby be prevented from returning to those friends to whom she might tell the tale of her abduction. Such was the abominable conspiracy devised for the accomplishment of Christina's ruin: but the reader has seen how providentially it was frustrated by the collision of the two vehicles.

The Duke of Marchmont, alighting from his carriage, and dismissing it, proceeded to Madame Angelique's house. He found the Frenchwoman in her elegantly-furnished apartment, plunged into a dejection from which not even frequent draughts of wine could serve to arouse her. The Duke at once saw that something was wrong: and he was speedily made acquainted with all that had occurred. He gave vent to bitter imprecations against the mishap; and then on questioning Madame Angelique more closely as to the personal appearance of the individual who had rescued Christina, he recognised Lord Octavian Meredith.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I have known for a long time that Meredith was deeply in love with this girl—and perhaps she will now fall entirely into his hands."

"And if not," responded Madame Angelique, "she will return to the Lady Indora—perhaps she *has* already returned—and perhaps Indora conjectures that it is I who had the girl carried off. I feel my lord as if troubles were thickening around me——"

"And I also!" muttered the Duke with deep concentrated bitterness: then he hastened to add aloud, "But we must do something, my dear madam—we are not to be beaten and baffled in this manner——"

"But what on earth *can* we do?" asked Madame Angelique, with an air of completest bewilderment.

"Yes—what can we do?" said the Duke, almost equally bewildered. "You know that the Lady Indora was already your enemy—you have

the certainty that she gave the information against you to the Commissioners of Police—and now this occurrence will only embitter her ten thousand times more virulently against you—aye, ten thousand, thousand times!"

The Duke looked very hard and very significantly at Madame Angelique,—who returned his gaze, but evidently at first with only a vague and uncertain idea of what he meant, until the deepening shade upon his countenance, ominous and scowling, gradually excited within her a notion of what was dwelling in his mind. She flung a half-frightened glance around, as if to assure herself that there were no listeners to their discourse; and then she said in a half-hushed voice, "Explain yourself, my lord—tell me candidly what you mean."

"I mean, Madame Angelique," he responded, likewise in a low subdued tone, "that the Lady Indora must be made away with by some means or another—whether Sagoonah will accomplish the deed or not."

Madame Angelique reflected profoundly for several minutes,—her looks being bent down the while; and then she said, "But how, my lord? Sagoonah vowed that she would attempt nothing more as long as that girl Christina was beneath her roof; and you see how signally the plan for removing her has failed."

The Duke of Marchmont now reflected in his turn: but it appeared that he could think of no new project, and was therefore compelled to fall back upon the old one—namely, of using Sagoonah, through the medium of Madame Angelique, as the instrument of that deed on the accomplishment of which he seemed so bent: for he said, "You must see the ayah again—there is no time to be lost—and it is useless for you to start objections. Sagoonah can alone achieve that which has now become so vitally important to us both. Look you, my dear madam!—as sure as fate, exposure and ruin will overtake you—and if you do not wish to find yourself shortly within the walls of Newgate——"

"Newgate?" echoed the infamous woman, smitten with the direst terror as that dreadful word fell upon her ears: and the look which she fixed upon the equally infamous nobleman was haggard and ghastly.

"Yes—Newgate, Madame Angelique!" repeated the Duke impressively; "and at least two years' imprisonment—if not transportation to one of our horrible penal colonies—for this attempted abduction of the young lady!"

"Good heavens!" murmured the wretched woman, wringing her hands; "to what a pass are things coming! Yes, yes—I must see Sagoonah again—I must ply all my arts and wiles—I must touch her upon those points where I have already found her most sensitive——in a word, I must leave no stone unturned to induce her——your Grace knows what I mean!"

"Yes—you must see her to-morrow," said the nobleman; "and I conjure you to fail not if you value your own safety. I will call on Meredith on some pretext to-morrow morning early—and I shall easily ascertain whether Christina be there, or whether she have gone back——But no!" he exclaimed, as a thought struck him: "to give myself all this trouble were simply ridiculous, inasmuch as you can at once obtain from the ayah precise information on the point."

The Duke and Madame Angelique continued to discuss their vile plans for another half-hour; and when Marchmont took his departure, the Frenchwoman sought her couch. But it was long ere she could compose herself to sleep; and when slumber did at length come upon her eyes, it brought with it a succession of hideous haunting dreams.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

ANOTHER PLOT.

On the following day, as early as nine o'clock in the morning, Madame Angelique, disguised in mean apparel, was loitering in the neighbourhood of the Princess's villa; and in about a quarter of an hour she was discerned by Sagoonah. The ayah—knowing that the domestics were all engaged indoors at the time, and that the faithful Mark was occupied in counting the numerous articles of splendid silver plate in the pantry—repaired to the fence where she was accustomed to hold her colloquies with the Frenchwoman; and the latter hastened towards her.

"So you failed last night," said Sagoonah, in a cold voice of contempt: "you entangled the bird in the snare, and then suffered her to escape."

"Did she return home speedily?" asked Madame Angelique, with feverish impatience.

"Yes—what else could she do? or what otherwise do you suppose that she would have done?"

"No matter," rejoined Madame Angelique quickly. "Does the Lady Indora suspect——"

"I listened," rejoined Sagoonah, "to the entire tale that Miss Ashton told her ladyship—I remained outside the door—I lost not a word—and I am convinced that her ladyship cannot do otherwise than suspect that *you* were the person into whose hands Christina fell."

"Think you that her ladyship will take proceedings against me?" asked the Frenchwoman.

"I know not," was Sagoonah's cold response: "I cannot always read the Lady Indora's thoughts."

"You see, Sagoonah," resumed Madame Angelique, "that I have done my best to carry off Christina—and I have failed. You must recall the vow you made to the effect that you will attempt nothing more so long as she remains beneath her ladyship's roof. Doubtless you have still the same motive——yes, you *must* have—your feeling of rancour against your mistress is still the same—and now you have an additional interest in removing her as speedily as possible from your path."

"An additional interest?" said Sagoonah, with a slight tincture of curiosity in her accents: and then she coldly added, "I do not understand you."

"I can speedily explain myself," rejoined Madame Angelique; "and I think I can show you that your interests are now mixed up with my own."

A smile of superb contempt curled the thin vermilion lips of the ayah; and she said, as if

haughtily spurning the bare idea, "My interests in any way common with your own?"

"I will soon make it apparent," answered Madame Angelique. "Listen attentively. The Lady Indora has already begun to wreak her vengeance upon me—it matters not how—but I have the positive proof that it is so:"—and she shuddered as she thought of Mr. Shadbolt. "This being the case, there can be no doubt that the Lady Indora will go on persecuting me; and even if she be desirous to remain in the background, she can induce Miss Ashton to take legal proceedings of a very serious character against me."

"And in what does all this concern me?" asked Sagoonah, with scornful impatience. "Because I have consented to listen to you on former occasions—to aid your projects—and even to appear to become the instrument for carrying out your views, think you that I will any more mix myself up with the concerns of one whose artifices are so clumsily arranged that they invariably fail? Look at your poltroon Duke who feared to seize upon the golden opportunity—look at your own scheme of last night, which the merest accident—a collision of vehicles—served to baffle! No—I will have naught more to do with you or your concerns, until you show yourself worthy of my complicity by removing this girl Ashton from within the walls of the villa."

"I will speedily convince you, Sagoonah," resumed Madame Angelique, who had listened with the utmost impatience to that long speech which was coldly but disdainfully uttered,—"I will speedily convince you that your interests are more intimately wrapped up in mine than you appear to imagine. What if the Lady Indora continues her persecutions against me—what if in the course of a few days, when the legal machinery is set in motion, she hands me over to the grasp of justice ——think you that in order to let myself down as lightly as possible, I would not tell all?"

"Ah! now I understand you," exclaimed Sagoonah, her large luminous eyes flashing forth living fires. "You would betray me to my mistress? And if you did so," continued the Hindoo woman, bending a look of mingled scorn and hate upon Madame Angelique, "think you that I would not be avenged? Yes!—into the depths of whatsoever dungeon the arm of the law might consign you to, would I penetrate—and my dagger should drink your heart's blood!"

"For which deed you would hang upon a gibbet," replied Madame Angelique. "But it is useless—worse than useless—for you and me to stand here threatening each other. At all events we now understand one another; and I have shown you that your own interests are more intimately connected with mine than you had previously imagined."

Sagoonah reflected for a few moments; and then she said in a low voice full of concentrated rage—but a rage which was altogether subdued so far as the expression of her countenance was concerned,—"Yes! if you, to help yourself, in the case supposed, were to prove thus treacherous, it would go ill with me. Now, woman, what mean you?" asked Sagoonah sternly. "You have sought me with some fixed plan—you have something settled in your mind. Speak quickly—what is it?"

"The Lady Indora must die!" answered Madame Angelique, in a low, deep, emphatic voice.

"And you mean to add that she must die by my hand?" said Sagoonah. "But it cannot be! Enough has already transpired to the knowledge of Christina Ashton to make her fix the deed upon me if it were accomplished."

"What if I were to place in your hand a subtle poison?" said Madame Angelique: and she looked up with a sinister aspect into the countenance of the ayah, who bent over the palings.

"No—nothing, nothing, so long as the girl Ashton is beneath that roof," replied Sagoonah firmly. "She sleeps lightly—she has already more than once detected me in wandering about the premises by night—she has seen me enter the chamber of my mistress—and she impressively told me that the silent hours of darkness are those which Murder chooses wherein to do its dreadful work."

"Ah! she has said that?" muttered Madame Angelique, with a look of mingled terror and vexation.

"Yes—she has said that," responded Sagoonah impressively: "and think you therefore that if a suspicious deed were done by night within those walls, the Christian girl would not at once lay her hand upon my shoulder, and say, 'It is you who did it!' No, woman!" continued Sagoonah, "my hand shall not wield the weapon, nor pour the drop of poison between the lips of my mistress, so long as Christina Ashton is *there*, and in a position to surrender me up to justice. If we were in mine own country it would be different; and I should defy her. For there the deed might be done under such circumstances as would completely avert suspicion from myself—aye, even though in my former conduct there had been anything suspicious! Yes—were we in mine own native Hindostan," proceeded the ayah, now speaking as if musing with herself rather than actually addressing her observations to Madame Angelique, "this hand of mine would convey to the couch of my mistress some reptile of deadly venom, whose fangs would instil the quick poison into her veins, and whose form would be found coiled up in the morning upon the bosom of its victim!"

"And you would do this if you were in India?" said Madame Angelique, whose imagination was horribly prolific in all vile expedients: "you would do this, Sagoonah?"

"Aye, I would do it," was the response: "because the presence of the reptile would tell its own tale—and no one would ask whether it had been conveyed by a human hand to the couch to which it brought death—or whether it had insidiously glided in and nestled there of its own accord. But in this country of yours you have no such venomous things that may be caught in any patch of grass, found amidst the foliage of any tree, or snatched up from the midst of any parterre of flowers."

"But if I told you, Sagoonah," said Madame Angelique, a devilish idea, which had already taken inception in her mind, expanding quickly there,—"if I told you where in this city of ours there are kept the deadliest specimens of your own reptile races to gratify the curiosity of visitors —would you have the courage——But, no! it is

ridiculous! You were only boasting because you believed that there were none of those venomous creatures here: you would not grasp the puff-adder or the cobra di capello in that hand of your's?"

A slight smile of scorn appeared upon the lips of the Hindoo woman; and she said, "This hand of mine has often and often clutched the deadliest cobra; and its writhing form has coiled itself round my naked arm. To snatch the reptile deftly by the neck—to hold it in such a way that it could not bend its head so as to plunge its fangs into my flesh—to amuse myself with gazing upon its expanded hood, and in marking the rage that vibrated in its small bright eyes—then with a lightning suddenness to fling it back again into the basket of the serpent-charmer—this was a freak, woman, which I have often and often performed."

"And you would perform it again—or at least a portion of it?" said Madame Angelique, with a sort of dreadful shuddering joy, as she once more looked up eagerly into the ayah's countenance.

"Aye—that would I," answered Sagoonah. "But it is useless thus to speak to one who is incredulous——Ah! now that I bethink me, this very afternoon will the Lady Indora take Christina Ashton to visit some Gardens in this metropolis of yours, where there are lions, and tigers, and other wild beasts pent up in cages; and it is promised that I shall accompany those ladies. If you were there to see, you would soon satisfy yourself whether the eye of the tiger can infuse terror into my heart. I who have seen the fierce animal loose and at large in our Indian jungles, crouching in readiness to spring upon the elephant which bore me in the castle on its back——"

"And you are going to those Gardens this afternoon?" exclaimed Madame Angelique, almost wild with delight: "the coincidence is indeed strange, because I had an idea——"

"What mean you?" asked Sagoonah.

"I mean," responded the infamous Frenchwoman, "that in those very Gardens to which you are going—if thither you indeed go——"

"I tell you that just now," interrupted Sagoonah impatiently,—"only a minute before I issued forth from the dwelling to join you here, I overheard her ladyship inform Christina of the little plan she meditated to afford her a variety of scene, and thereby cheer her spirits somewhat after the incidents of the past night; and Miss Ashton, who gives a ready assent to everything her benefactress proposes, expressed her thanks. All this was said in my presence; and the Lady Indora added with a smile, that I should accompany them,—for that inasmuch as I had seen the wildest animals free amidst the jungles of my own native land, and full of menacing mischief,—I should now behold them pent up behind iron bars, and reduced to subjection, if not to tameness, by the dominant power of man."

"Ah, then you will go to those Gardens!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "But did not your mistress tell you that there you will likewise behold specimens of the deadliest reptiles which belong to your own native Hindostan?"

"No," answered Sagoonah. "Perhaps her ladyship is ignorant thereof."

"And yet it is so," rejoined Madame Angelique. "A special house is devoted in those Gardens to the keeping of the reptiles; and there will you see them in glass cases. If you have the opportunity, Sagoonah, would you dash your hand through the frontage of one of those cases—seize upon the reptile within—and bear it away with you by some suitable means——say, for instance, a thick leathern bag that you might have concealed about your person?"

"I would do it," answered Sagoonah. "But is it possible that such opportunity could present itself?"

"I have often visited those Gardens," replied Madame Angelique, "and have been alone for half-an-hour at a time in the reptile-house."

"You love, then, to gaze upon those venomous creatures?" said Sagoonah; and even under the coldness of her tone and look there was a certain satire perceptible, as if she meant to imply that there was a sympathy between the nature of the Frenchwoman and that of the snakes which she loved to contemplate.

"Yes—I have frequently stood to gaze upon those reptiles," answered Madame Angelique, not choosing to notice that half-covert irony which pervaded Sagoonah's speech. "I tell you that you will find the opportunity if you have the courage to avail yourself of it. Those who may enter the reptile-house afterwards, will believe that the glass has been broken by accident, and that the reptile has glided forth of its own accord. There will be consternation;—of that no matter. *You* will know the secret—but you need not proclaim it. The cobra—if it did really thus escape, as it will be supposed—must go somewhere: and why not find its way to the villa of your mistress? and if to the villa, why not to her own bed? Who, then, shall dare tax you with the deed? Not even Christina Ashton would for an instant entertain the suspicion that the deed was your own."

Sagoonah gazed for a few moments in a sort of astonishment, not altogether unblended with admiration, upon the woman who despite the failure of her former artifices, had a devilish ingenuity sufficient for the concoction of such a scheme as this. Then the ayah mused for a few instants more; and at length she said, "Yes—if the opportunity serve, I will do it. And now begone!"

Madame Angelique sped away, her heart fiercely yet shudderingly elate with the horrible triumph which she had just achieved in respect to again bending Sagoonah to her purpose.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, when the Princess Indora and Christina Ashton, attended by Sagoonah, alighted from the carriage at the entrance of the Zoological Gardens in the Regent's Park. We have already said that her Highness, the King of Inderabad's daughter, frequently—indeed, almost daily—rode out in her equipage: but this was the first time that she had visited any public institution or scene of recreation. She had however for some time longed to behold those animals which she had often seen wild in her native country, here in complete subjection to the power of man; and she now availed herself of an opportunity when, for the kindest reasons, she sought to cheer Christina's spirits and treat her to a change from that monotony of existence which she feared that her young friend experienced at

the villa at Bayswater. She knew nothing of Lord Octavian Meredith's attachment to Christina, nor of the painful incidents connected therewith: she had therefore no reason to hesitate about bringing our heroine into the vicinage of that nobleman's dwelling,—for she knew that it was situated in the Regent's Park. On the other hand, when the proposal to visit the Gardens was made to Christina, she had not dared hint that she would rather not proceed into a neighbourhood where she stood a chance of falling in with Lord Octavian; because to have raised any objection of the kind, would as a matter of course have necessitated the revelation of those circumstances which maiden modesty and virgin bashfulness naturally prompted her to conceal.

There were very few visitors at the Zoological Gardens on the occasion when the Princess Indora and Christina, attended by Sagoonah, thus visited them. Her Highness wore an oriental garb—but the very plainest which belonged to her wardrobe; and she had carefully dispensed with much ornament, so as to avoid as much as possible attracting notice. The ayah was clad in her habitual white costume: Christina's toilet displayed an elegant neatness. Three such beings could not possibly enter a public place without striking the notice of those who were also there, few though they were. All three being characterized by a remarkable beauty—that of Indora so magnificent, that of Sagoonah so darkly splendid, and that of our heroine so exquisitely interesting in its classic perfection—two of them moreover wearing peculiar costumes—it was impossible that they could escape special attention. Yet the persons who were there, pressed not rudely upon them—but moved as it were at a respectful distance, until when it was whispered by one of the officials that the principal object of interest was an eastern lady of rank and fortune; and then this announcement was taken as a hint that the little party wished to be as free from observation as possible during their visit to the Gardens.

At first Sagoonah kept tolerably close to her mistress and Christina: but gradually she increased the interval between herself and them. This she was easily enabled to do without exciting any particular attention on their part: for it appeared by no means strange that she should linger a little behind them to contemplate some particular animal or bird belonging to a clime far remote and different from her own, and which specimens of natural history she had consequently never seen before. We will not dwell upon unnecessary details: suffice it to observe that after having inspected the various objects which presented themselves to their view in one portion of the Gardens, they passed through the tunnel and entered upon the other division. Facing them was a placard indicating a particular direction—and with these words, "To the Reptiles."

Sagoonah understood them; and a thrill vibrated throughout her entire frame. She felt for something that was concealed under her long white dress; and having assured herself that it was all safe there, she looked for a moment as if she had already achieved some grand triumph: then suddenly relapsing into her wonted demeanour, she followed the Princess and our heroine into the reptile-house. There, in cases of different sizes, and each having a frontage of thick plate glass, were all the most terrible specimens of the serpent species. In one a huge python, sixteen or seventeen feet long, and as thick in the largest part of its form as a man's thigh, was creeping lazily out of a tank of water: in another an immense boa-constrictor was coiled round the branch of a tree placed there for his comfort and accommodation: more serpents of the same species were to be seen in other cages,—some winding their slimy lengths over the gravel strown on the floors—others coiled up on thick blankets, or protruding their heads from amidst the folds of horse-cloths, or licking the glass frontages of their dens with their forked tongues. The venomous reptiles were to be seen in much smaller cases on the opposite side of the room. There was the rattlesnake, with a host of little ones coiling, writhing, and wriggling about their parent—a horrible and loathsome brood! There was the puff-adder, with its hideous bloated head, the most transient glance at which was calculated to send a shudder through the frame of the beholder who knew that its bite was death. But not less venomous was the dark cobra, with its head reared up from amidst its coils, its hood expanded, and its throat of a shell-like appearance and whiteness. It was upon this object that Sagoonah's eyes at once riveted themselves; and if any one had observed her at the time, it would have seemed as if those luminous black orbs of her's reflected the reptile-fire which gleamed from the pupils of the hooded snake. But there was no one in the room except herself, her mistress, and Christina; and quickly averting her eyes from the object of her vivid interest, she affected to bestow her attention on the more monstrous serpents.

"To me, my dear Christina," said the Princess, "the aspect of the greater portion of these species of reptiles is more or less familiar; and if you had lived a few years in my native country, you would have become sufficiently accustomed to the same spectacles as to be able to look upon them now without so strange a shudder as that which I perceive has just swept through your form."

"I pray your ladyship to pardon me," said our heroine,—"do not deem me foolishly weak, if I assure you that I can remain here no longer to look upon these reptiles."

"Come then, Christina—we will seek some other and more agreeable objects of interest. Sagoonah," added the Princess, addressing the ayah in their own native tongue, "you can follow at your leisure if you have any particular wish to remain here awhile and contemplate these creatures, most of which must however be sufficiently familiar to you."

"I will follow almost immediately, my lady," responded Sagoonah. "Monsters of this particular species"—and she looked towards the python—"I have never seen before."

The Princess Indora hurried Christina from the snake-room: and as they passed forth, a glow of triumph and satisfaction again thrilled through Sagoonah's form. She watched them until they disappeared from her view by suddenly diverging from the straight path leading from the snake-house along the back of the canal: then she hastened to the door—she issued forth a few paces—her eyes were rapidly swept around—no one was nigh—and she hurried back into the reptile-room.

A sinister fire burnt in her large dark eyes as she approached the case containing the deadly cobra. He darted his head somewhat forward, as if with an inveterate malignity longing to spring at her, but yet with the instinctive knowledge that there was a barrier of glass between them and that he would only sustain a hurt by dashing himself ineffectually against that transparent frontage. The calm intrepidity of ten thousand amazons was concentrated in the soul of Sagoonah then! She glanced at the arrangements of the cases: she saw that the glass fronts were made to slide up and down, but that they were fastened by small brass padlocks, one of which was fixed on the top of every case. She tried the padlock above the case in which the cobra lay; and as if Satan himself had purposely lent his aid to further her foul design, the padlock yielded to her hand. The keeper had either omitted to lock it—or else had so slovenly done his work as not to see that the semi-circular bolt had not been thrust in far enough to meet the lock itself. But whichever it were, the padlock was now removed by Sagoonah's hand; and again did her eyes flash forth the fire of triumph.

Once more she sped to the entrance of the snake-house and swept her looks around. Still the coast was altogether clear; and she retraced her way towards the deadly cobra's den. Then from beneath the folds of her garments she drew forth a small bag of the thickest and strongest leather, —a bag that was about large enough to contain a fowl or small rabbit. She had so skilfully arranged a piece of whipcord to pass along the top or opening, that it could be closed and drawn tight in the twinkling of an eye—just as a lady's reticule is made to shut. This bag she opened to a suitable width, and placed it in readiness to receive the reptile. Then without the slightest fear—without even so much as the faintest sensation of a curdling of the blood—she lifted the glass with her left hand, —having her right in readiness to use at the moment that should seem advisable. The reptile appeared to watch for a few instants the ascending glass, as if it were something to which it was totally unaccustomed: for be it well understood that the glasses of those cases were never raised while the reptiles were in them, and only when they had been driven or lifted into an adjoining empty case by a stout wire passed through a small hole at the top. Thus the cobra now seemed to follow with its cold vibrating eyes the ascending glass, as if it were something that struck it with a vague terror: then it closed its hood—turned its head round—and began to glide to the back part of the case. Not more quickly could the reptile itself have darted at Sagoonah than was her right hand thrust into the case; and ere her eye could wink she had clutched the serpent by the neck, but so close to its head that it could not possibly turn its mouth sufficiently so as to touch her finger even with its tongue. Its tail was instantaneously coiled round Sagoonah's dark but admirably modelled arm: but in another moment the head of the reptile was forced into the opening of the bag. A partial drawing of the string constricted the opening to just the limit of the reptile's dimensions, so that it could not turn its head to bite as it gradually glided through her loosening grasp; and just as the point of its tail slipped through her palm, the string was drawn completely tight. Sagoonah then lowered the glass to within about an inch of the bottom of the case,—thus giving it the appearance as if the serpent itself by its own efforts had raised it thus far; and she sped to rejoin her mistress and Christina,—the leathern bag with its fearful contents, being concealed under her garments. She had not been altogether separated from the Princess and our heroine more than five minutes before she thus overtook them; and it was with a demeanour as calm and collected as if nothing at all extraordinary had taken place.

Our young heroine had been shocked and sickened by the contemplation of the reptiles; she felt faint—she looked very pale—and the Princess Indora accordingly resolved to take her home at once. They were in the close vicinage of the revolving-gate which affords egress exactly opposite the principal entrance: the carriage was in readiness —and thus within two or three minutes after Sagoonah had rejoined them, they were seated in the equipage once more.

A quarter of an hour had probably elapsed from the departure of the Princess, when the principal keeper of the snake-house, on entering the room, was smitten with horror on observing that the glass front of the cobra's case was raised, and that the cobra itself had disappeared. The cold perspiration burst out of the man's forehead; and he shuddered with a convulsing terror as the dreadful thought struck him that from some corner the deadly serpent might spring upon him. But the room is so arranged that a few moments' careful scrutiny is sufficient for the eye to penetrate into every nook; and the keeper, regaining somewhat of his self-possession, was thus enabled to satisfy himself that the cobra was not within that room. He was a prudent man—he did not wish to excite a consternation amongst the visitors in the grounds: he closed the glass of the case, and sped away to the superintending authority of the Gardens. This individual was speedily on the spot: there was evidence to prove that the padlock had been neglected by the under-keeper; and the natural surmise was that the reptile, by dint of its own muscular action, had succeeded in raising the glass. The circumstance was whispered to some of the most trustworthy of the men employed on the grounds; and a search was instituted for the missing snake: but it is scarcely necessary to inform the reader that this search terminated unsuccessfully. The matter was consequently hushed up: and to those who inquired what had become of the cobra, the response was given that it had died.

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE COBRA.

THE Princess, Christina, and Sagoonah returned to the villa; and by the time of their arrival, our heroine's indisposition had passed off. She expressed a hope that her Highness would not accuse her of any foolish affectation; and Indora hastened to reassure her on the point in the most friendly terms.

The hours passed on—it was close upon ten

o'clock in the evening—and in a short time the Princess would retire to her couch. Sagoonah had the principal charge of her mistress's bed-chamber; and she knew perfectly well that the English maid-servants would not enter it after she herself had performed the last offices there. She likewise felt tolerably certain that the cobra when once placed in the bed, would be too well satisfied with its warm comfortable quarters to leave them speedily. At all events when the door should be closed, Sagoonah knew full well that the snake could not possibly get out; and therefore even if it should leave the bed and coil itself up in any other part of the room, the ayah calculated upon the hideous certainty that the Princess must become the victim of its fangs. She was all the more confident in this respect from certain little circumstances which we may as well mention. Indora's dressing-room joined the bed-chamber: there was, as a matter of course, a door of communication between them; but the dressing-room was likewise entered by a door from the passage. It was by this latter door that the Princess was wont to seek her dressing-room of an evening; and Sagoonah's presence was never required for any length of time in aiding the Princess with her night-toilet. Thus, by keeping the door of communication closed, Sagoonah knew that the snake would be confined to the bed-chamber, and that she herself would incur no danger, while in the dressing-room, of becoming its victim instead of her mistress. Such were the cold-blooded, fiendish, diabolical calculations which the vile Hindoo woman weighed in her mind while pondering the fearful deed of iniquity that she contemplated.

It was close upon ten o'clock when Sagoonah had completed the wonted arrangements in the dressing-room and the bed-chamber. She was careful to place in the dressing-room every article that her mistress might need in order that there should be no chance of requiring anything to be fetched from the bed-chamber. The arrangements being completed, Sagoonah ascended to her own room—unlocked her box—and stood carefully back for a moment to convince herself that the deadly reptile had not by any means escaped from the leathern bag. Nor had it. Then Sagoonah acquired the further certainty that the strings of the bag were tight; and concealing it beneath the folds of her white drapery, she descended to Indora's chamber. Approaching the bed she drew down the clothes, and with exceeding caution she relaxed the strings of the bag somewhat,—keeping her eyes riveted with scrutinising intentness upon the opening thus made. In about a minute the hideous reptile began to protrude its head; and just as the commencement of its neck was visible, Sagoonah grasped it with the forefinger and thumb of her right hand—so quickly, so nicely, and with such admirable expertness, that the snake had not time to plunge its fangs into her flesh. She now drew it completely out of the bag: again was her arm quickly encircled by its dark slimy folds: but she speedily disengaged the coils from that arm—and with one dexterous effort threw the serpent into the middle of the bed. It instantaneously sprang up to dart at her: but she commenced a low yet quick half-humming, half-singing strain. The reptile was charmed—and its head gradually sank down amidst its coils. Then she covered it up with the bed-clothes, and retreated towards the door of the dressing-room—but never once averting her eyes from the couch, lest the deadly serpent should be gliding after her. It did not make its appearance: she entered the dressing-room; and the door closed between herself and the chamber in which she had left the venomous cobra. Ascending to her own room, she deposited the leathern bag in her trunk, which she relocked; and then proceeded to join her fellow-domestics, with an air as settled and composed as that which she had worn when overtaking her mistress and Christina in the Zoological Gardens after her final issue from the snake-house.

Meanwhile the Princess Indora and our heroine were seated together in the elegantly-furnished drawing-room; and the time-piece on the mantel proclaimed with its silver tongue the hour of ten. Scarcely had it finished striking, when the sounds of a vehicle stopping at the garden-gate were heard; and these were immediately followed by the loud ringing of that gate-bell. The summons was answered; and the Princess Indora expressed to Christina her wonder who could possibly be coming at that hour of the night. In a minute or two Sagoonah made her appearance; and having performed the wonted low salutation, she stood in the attitude of a slave in the presence of the Princess, waiting to be questioned.

"What is it, Sagoonah?" asked Indora, who, since Christina had been with her, was accustomed to speak to her ayah in the English language when in the young lady's presence—not merely because she was unwilling to seem to have any secrets with our heroine, but likewise because she wished to enable Sagoonah to have as much practice as possible in that tongue in which Christina was her tutoress.

"May it please your ladyship," answered the ayah, "two messengers from your royal father humbly solicit an immediate audience."

"Messengers from my dear father?" said Indora, clasping her hands with a gush of filial emotions. "Let them at once be admitted."

Sagoonah bowed and withdrew. Christina rose from her seat, and was likewise about to retire from motives of delicacy—when the Princess retained her, saying, "Sit down, my dear friend. These messengers can have no secret to communicate which you may not hear; and even if they had, they would converse with me in a language which you cannot understand."

Our heroine accordingly resumed her seat; and in a few moments Sagoonah introduced the two messengers from the King of Inderabad. The ayah retired; and the messengers prostrated themselves at the feet of her who was heiress to the crown of their royal master. Both were of the dark Hindoo colour; and both were handsomely dressed in their native oriental garb—the chief material of their raiment being a dark velvet embroidered and laced with gold. One was a fine tall man, of portly form and commanding presence: his age might have been about fifty—and he was the senior in years as well as in rank. His companion was short of stature—slightly made and thin—with an angular profile, and restless eyes of exceeding sharpness. He was scarcely forty years of age; and Christina perceived that his garb, though handsome, was in several respects

less rich than that of his comrade. That they were both devotedly attached to the royal family whom they served, might be judged—first of all, from the fact of their being chosen as the confidential messengers of the King to his daughter—and secondly, from the look of joy and satisfaction which overspread their countenances the moment they were ushered into the presence of Indora.

But those looks, so expressive of the natural ebullitions of their faithful hearts, almost instantaneously subsided into an air of profoundest respect, as they sank down upon their knees at the feet of the princess. For a moment tears started into Indora's eyes as she beheld those personages whose presence so vividly reminded her of the palatial and paternal home which she had abandoned in order to follow the object of her devoted love to a strange and far-off clime: but quickly conquering her emotions—or at least preventing herself from being led into any farther betrayal of them—she addressed the two messengers. She spoke in her native tongue; and though Christina understood it not, yet she comprehended sufficient from the tones and looks of her Highness to enable her to judge that she was speaking most kindly to them, and that she was thanking them for the fidelity and devotion they had displayed. She gave them her hand to kiss: each touched it respectfully with his lips, at the same time bowing profoundly once more. The Princess then made a sign for them to rise from their kneeling posture; and as they obeyed, the senior emissary produced a letter which he tendered to her Highness. She took it with a trembling hand; and fresh tears sprang into her eyes as she beheld the superscription in the well known writing of her father. She motioned the messengers to seat themselves; and this they did upon an ottoman on the oppo-

site side of the apartment. Hastily wiping away her tears, Indora perused the letter: it was a somewhat lengthy one; and its contents engaged her for upwards of ten minutes.

During this interval Christina occasionally glanced towards the two emissaries, whose peculiar costume she naturally had a certain curiosity to examine,—when it gradually occurred to her that the younger messenger was exhibiting a certain feeling of uneasiness. At first he, as well as his comrade, had remained seated with statue-like immovability: but by degrees the younger one began to look around—to give slight starts—to seem even as if he were shuddering and trembling—to sniff the air with his nostrils—and then to fix his naturally piercing eyes upon some corner of the apartment with an additional and increasing keenness. It was evident also to Christina that he strove to surmount whatsoever feeling thus moved him, but that it was gradually growing stronger than himself. Even his companion, the senior messenger, at length perceived it, and bent a reproving look upon his comrade: then the latter became motionless and rigid for another minute or two—but at the expiration thereof he again yielded to that sense of nervous uneasiness which though so visible, was yet utterly unaccountable to our wondering heroine.

The Princess Indora finished the perusal of the letter; and for a few minutes she remained absorbed in the reflections which a communication from her father might naturally be supposed to engender in her mind. Then she addressed a few words to the senior emissary; and he responded at some considerable length, as if he were giving explanations in answer to a question put.

"These faithful emissaries," said the Princess, addressing herself to Christina, "come, as you heard Sagoonah announce, from my royal father. They left Inderabad three months back; and they have travelled by the overland route to this country. From Bombay they were accompanied by an English interpreter, whose services they there procured; and thus they have experienced no difficulty in the prosecution of their journey. They only reached London this evening; and they beg me to excuse them for having come hither at so late an hour—but they judged that I should be only too well satisfied to receive the earliest tidings from my beloved father. He is well; but he misses me greatly. His letter is full of kindness—and he urges me to return to my native land with the least possible delay. I have been expecting some such summons as this ——and yet the purpose which brought me to England, is not as yet accomplished! It cannot however be long," continued Indora, in a musing strain rather than actually addressing herself to Christina;—"no, it cannot be long ere my object shall be worked out. Heaven has already aided in placing me on the right track! The time, therefore, I feel confident is not far remote when I shall be enabled to obey my father's summons; and it was this idea, Christina, which made me tell you yesterday that if I am soon compelled by circumstances to leave England, you should not find yourself unprovided for."

Our heroine expressed her gratitude with a look fervently bent upon her high-born friend; and then the Princess resumed the conversation with the senior emissary. But by this time the uneasiness of the junior one had risen into a sore trouble and agitation: he gathered up his legs completely under him on the ottoman—his slender wiry form appeared to be convulsed with spasmodic writhings—his eyes vibrated with a visible terror—he sniffed the air—the perspiration stood upon his dark bronzed brow. Indora now observed the condition of the man; and stopping short in some remark which she was addressing to his companion, she gazed upon him with bewildered astonishment. He threw himself at her feet—looked shudderingly around—and then ejaculated something which had the instantaneous effect of making the Princess Indora herself start, as if abruptly smitten with the infection of the man's own terror. But instantaneously recovering her self-possession, she smiled, and addressed him in words the tones of which were evidently fraught with encouragement, as Christina herself could not fail to comprehend.

"You will be amazed, my dear friend," said the Princess, addressing herself in English to our heroine, "when I explain to you the reason of all this——the more so too, that the coincidence is strange, after we ourselves have only this very day visited a certain place. Compose yourself, Christina—because you know it is as impossible as I have just been endeavouring to persuade this messenger that it is——but he expresses his belief—nay, even his conviction, that there is a serpent of deadly nature within these walls."

Christina had recoiled with sickness and loathing from the contemplation of the reptiles in the Zoological Gardens; and it was no affected sensation on her part. But she was not a silly, frivolous, weak-minded girl to yield herself to terrors when her own sound and steady judgment gave her every reason to believe that there was no actual foundation for them. She therefore at once said, "Yes, it is impossible, my lady: for we have no venomous reptiles in this country—except the viper and adder, whose bites are seldom if ever fatal; and at all events, I have never read nor heard of one instance of their introducing themselves into houses."

Meanwhile the trembling messenger had risen from his kneeling posture; and slowly but keenly were his looks being plunged into every corner of the room. The senior messenger had started up in consternation when his comrade had ejaculatingly announced his conviction of the presence of a serpent within those walls: but he was somewhat cheered and soothed by the assurances which the Princess had given, although he still looked doubtingly upon his Hindoo companion.

"It is at least strange," said the Princess, speaking more hastily than before to Christina: "for this individual" (alluding to the junior messenger) "was originally one of the most celebrated snake-charmers in all India, until for a particular service rendered my royal father took him into his household and assigned him a confidential post. It is the peculiar instinct, if I may use the term, of some of these snake-charmers that they can actually tell when they are in the vicinage of that most deadly of reptiles, the cobra di capello. Perhaps it is an exhalation from their slimy forms which impregnates the atmosphere, and which though imperceptible to those unacquainted with the peculiarities of that species of serpent, is

nevertheless sufficient to strike the extreme sensitiveness of the astute snake-charmers."

"But as for a cobra being within these walls, my lady," said Christina, "it is simply impossible!"—and yet as she spoke she shuddered at the bare idea.

"I will question him again," observed the Princess. "But look at him!—assuredly this is no groundless nor mere panic terror under which he is labouring!"

She addressed the Hindoo in a few words: his answer was given with rapid utterance and vehement gesticulation, as if while in the expression of a positive conviction he were only held back by a sense of the respect due to a superior from upbraiding her Highness for doubting him.

"He persists in his assertion," said Indora, again turning to our heroine. "Do not alarm yourself—but something must be done. I know this man well—he would not attempt to deceive me——Besides, look at him again, and judge for yourself!"

Christina indeed had not taken her eyes off the Hindoo: his agitation was painfully increasing—and she was convinced that it was most real. He appeared to be writhing as if in actual torture—shuddering to the innermost confines of his being: his teeth chattered as if with the cold—the perspiration stood in large drops upon his bronzed forehead. The Princess addressed him again: he spoke vehemently, but still with the completest respectfulness, in reply;—and he extended his hands as if he asked for something.

"He persists in declaring that there *is* a cobra in the house," said the Princess, again speaking to Christina; and he asks for some musical instrument, which, if he once possessed it, would dispel all his terror and make him feel that he suddenly becomes the master of the serpent with no fear of falling its victim."

"Mark has a flageolet," hastily suggested Christina: "your ladyship knows that he is fond of shutting himself up in his own room and playing it——"

"An excellent thought of your's, my sweet young friend," responded Indora; "and as certain orders must be issued, it is absolutely necessary to summon one of the servants at any risk."

"At any risk, my lady?" said Christina, turning pale. "Then you yourself begin to believe——"

"I know not what to think," interrupted Indora. "On the one hand it seems impossible—but on the other it strikes me that the matter is not to be neglected. The longer I look at that man, the more I am staggered——But we are wasting time, Christina! Have the goodness to ring the bell twice: it is the special summons for Mark."

The bell was rung accordingly; and it was promptly answered: for Mark was in the hall conversing with the English interpreter who had accompanied the two messengers to the villa. Mark, as the reader will remember, had himself been in India; and he was therefore well pleased to fall in with a fellow-countryman who had just arrived from that orient clime, and who could tell him all the news. Mark's presence in the hall had been productive of one beneficial effect—although he little suspected it: for it prevented the ayah from stealing up-stairs to listen on the landing at what was taking place in the drawing-room—a proceeding in which the wily Hindoo woman was very likely to have indulged, were it not that she dreaded the idea of exciting Mark's suspicion. She had already said in the servants' room that her work was all done up-stairs—no bell summoned her—she had no excuse for ascending those stairs—and they were so situated with respect to the entrance-hall and the landing above, that if she had gone up and loitered on the latter, she would have stood every chance of being detected by Mark who was stationed in the former.

But to resume the thread of our narrative. Mark answered the summons given by the double ringing of the drawing-room bell; and the Princess hastily explained to him the strange but serious apprehension entertained by the Hindoo messenger. The faithful domestic was himself somewhat staggered—though it was certainly singular for an Englishman to be told that there was a venomous reptile of India within the walls of a dwelling on the outskirt of London: but still he *was* staggered, because he beheld the excessive agitation of the Hindoo, and his experiences of Indian life were sufficient to convince him that it was a real terror under which the emissary was labouring. Besides, Mark was prudent—and he knew full well that as an apprehension was created, it would be better to have it dispelled as soon as possible, no matter whether it should be proved groundless or else justified by the result.

"Say not a word to the other domestics," observed the Princess hurriedly, though not for an instant did she lose her presence of mind: "it will be useless to terrify them——"

"But Sagoonah and Tippoo, my lady, will hear the music," suggested Mark; "and they will know what it means."

"True!" ejaculated the Princess: then, after a moment's reflection, she added, "Go you first and fetch the flageolet—then return to the servants' hall—see that all the domestics are there—lock the door—put the key in your pocket—and tell them what you will. At all events you will prevent them from rushing frantically about the house, or escaping into the garden——But go, good Mark—and for heaven's sake look well on the staircase and elsewhere—for if the horrible suspicion be indeed correct——But go, Mark—I am needlessly wasting time!"

The faithful intendant of Indora's household quitted the room; and immediately he had disappeared, the junior messenger who now seemed to have become more calm, said something to the Princess.

"He still perseveres in declaring that there is a cobra within the walls of this villa," said the Princess to Christina: "but since the door has been opened and shut twice during the last few minutes, he says that his instinctive susceptibility tells him that the reptile is not here, in this room—but in some other—and he thinks overhead."

"Good heavens, the bed-chambers!" ejaculated Christina, who at each successive stage of these singular proceedings was more deeply catching the infection of terror notwithstanding the natural strength of her mind.

"Do not be alarmed," replied the Princess,

now completely cool and collected: "it may be all an error—it may arise from something exhaling a peculiar odour which strikes upon this man's exquisitely keen sensitiveness: but if on the other hand, there be really a cobra within these walls, rest assured that by the aid of the music it will be discovered and destroyed."

"But if it should suddenly spring on one of these messengers?" said Christina, with a frightened look of inquiry.

"There is no chance when once the piping begins——But here is Mark—and now the mystery will soon be solved!"

The intendant appeared with the flageolet, which he had been to fetch from the servants' hall; and having handed it to the junior emissary, he hastened off again, to do Indora's bidding in respect to locking himself in with the other servants, in the room where they habitually sate. In that room the English interpreter was now seated: there also were Sagoonah and the Indian manservant Tippoo—the groom—and two English females (for the Princess had taken an additional maid into her service since Christina became an inmate of the villa). The coachman did not sleep at the house, and had already gone to his own home. On returning to that room, Mark deliberately locked the door and consigned the key to his pocket. He was the last man in the world—much too sedate and serious—to play a practical joke; and therefore his fellow-servants at once comprehended that there was something strange and unusual in progress—while perhaps Sagoonah, having a guilty conscience, might be smitten with the suspicion that the proceeding related to her own infernal project: but if so, she outwardly betrayed nothing.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Mark?" inquired the groom, but in that tone of respect which he was always accustomed to adopt towards his mistress's intendant.

"You need not alarm yourselves," responded Mark: "it is merely a wise precaution. Every one knows we have a certain species of venomous reptile in this country—and there is some little reason to suppose that one has got into the house."

"Well, Mr. Mark," exclaimed the groom, scarcely able to prevent himself from bursting out into a laugh, "and if there should be such a thing as a viper in the house, it is not by locking ourselves in this room that we shall get it out again. I would just as soon tackle it as I did the large rat that I killed in the stable yesterday morning."

"There happens to be a snake-charmer from India here this evening," replied Mark; "and perhaps her ladyship has a mind to see whether his skill extends to English reptiles as well as to Asiatic ones. But hark! he has commenced! Those are the sounds of my flageolet!"

The two English maid-servants were very much alarmed at the idea of a viper being in the house: the groom now laughed outright—Mark continued serious—and the English interpreter knew not exactly what to think. Tippoo, the Indian manservant, appeared to be suddenly seized with terror as the sounds of the peculiar melody which the junior messenger drew from the flageolet, reached the servants' hall: for Tippoo instantaneously recognised the particular strains used in charming the cobra in his own native land. As for Sagoonah, she saw at once that the presence of the reptile was suspected—she was at no loss to conjecture how the instincts of the *quondam* snake-charmer must have led to the discovery—she perceived that her project was ruined—and she inwardly cursed the inauspicious arrival of the messengers on this particular night. But so far as her own personal safety was concerned, she had no dread: she felt convinced that it could not be for an instant suspected that she had brought away the cobra from the Gardens, or that she had placed it in the couch of a mistress whom she was believed to love with so sincere and inflexible a devotion.

We must now return to the drawing-room, which Mark had so recently quitted, leaving the junior messenger in possession of the flageolet. This individual made a sign to his superior, who at once drew his keen sharp sword from its sheath, and was thus in readiness to act as circumstances might direct. The junior emissary,—whose last remnant of terror had altogether vanished, and who now seemed to be inspired with a confidence as great as his recent alarm—began to play upon the flageolet in a peculiar manner. At the same time he turned himself slowly round, as if moving on a pivot where he was standing; and his searching eyes thus gradually embraced the whole circuit of the apartment. In a few minutes he desisted, and said something to the Princess.

"His first impression is fully confirmed," remarked her Highness to Christina: "he is convinced that the cobra is *not* in this room—for if so, the reptile would speedily have come dancing forth from its lurking-place. You and I will remain here while they pursue their search elsewhere."

"And your ladyship does now really believe," said Christina, shuddering, "that there is such a venomous reptile about these premises?"

"If I were to give you the assurance," rejoined Indora, "that there is nothing of the kind to be apprehended in my estimation, I should be speaking untruthfully. And yet, on the other hand, I am at a loss to comprehend how it can possibly be. But we shall soon be relieved from uncertainty and suspense."

Indora now gave the emissaries, in her own native language, some information as to the other apartments; and they quitted the drawing-room together,—the junior one being careful to recommence his play upon the flageolet the instant the door was opened. They issued forth, closing the door behind them; and the peculiar music which the Hindoo made upon the instrument, continued to reach the ears of Indora and Christina as the emissaries passed across the landing to another room. The Princess sate calm and self-possessed: but Christina could not help experiencing strange sensations creeping over her. What if by any accident the Hindoo's instinct had so far failed him, and the music had so far lost its wonted charm, that the serpent—if a serpent indeed there were—was actually in that very room? what if presently it should come gliding forth from beneath some piece of furniture, with that stealthy insidiousness which characterises the reptile species alone? For aught Christina knew to the con-

trary, death might be close at hand: the agent of destruction might be noiselessly insinuating itself towards herself or her much-loved benefactress.

"Do not be alarmed, my dear friend," said the Princess, penetrating what was thus passing in the mind of our heroine: "you may rest assured that the instinct of the snake-charmer cannot fail him—especially one who in his time was so famous as this Hindoo emissary. You would be astonished to behold those snake-charmers in my own native land. They not merely play with the deadly cobra: they irritate and enrage the reptile—but all the while being careful that the peculiar music is sustained; for if the flow of the melody which constitutes the charm for the serpent and the talisman of the charmer's safety, were to cease, that instant were death! There are European travellers and writers who have endeavoured to prove that the poisonous fangs have been torn from the mouth of the cobra before the snake-charmer will venture to play with it; and that therefore the feat resolves itself into a mere piece of jugglery which could be as well performed with the most innocuous of reptiles. But those writers err: for cases have come within mine own experience—or rather within my own knowledge—where men have been bitten by the reptiles with which they were playing a little time before; and they have died of those bites. For instance, a few years ago, in my father's sovereign city of Inderabad, an itinerant snake-charmer earned the applause of crowds in every street by the introduction of some novelties into the wonted routine of the performance adopted by men of his class. He retired to rest at night in a hut on the outskirt of the city,—his purse being well filled with coin; and his basket of reptiles—the source of his gains—safely secured, as he thought. In the morning the man was found dead; and a slight puncture on the cheek—or rather two small punctures, close together, and not larger than if they had been formed by the point of a lancet—indicated the cause of his death. One of the cobras had contrived to escape from the basket; and as there was no charming music at the time to fascinate its ear, it plunged its fangs into the flesh of its master. It was found coiled up in a corner of the hut, gorged with some small animal that it had swallowed; and being inert after its meal, was easily destroyed."

While the Princess was yet speaking, the sounds of the two emissaries' footsteps were heard overhead: they were evidently passing along the passage in which the principal bed-chambers were situated. The music had never ceased playing from the instant they quitted the drawing-room: and though Christina was somewhat encouraged by the assurance which the Princess had ere now given her, she notwithstanding still experienced the cold creeping sensation as if a prolonged shudder were continuously creeping over her.

"Now they are in my chamber," said the Princess, as the footsteps were heard in the apartment precisely over the drawing-room. "Hark! the music plays louder—it grows more rapid! I know its meaning well! Yes, Christina—that man's instinct did not deceive him!—there is assuredly a deadly reptile in the house——Ah! and it is in my own room!"

Our heroine gave a half-stifled shriek of affright as she threw herself into the arms of the Princess,—weeping and sobbing upon that lady's bosom, and mumuring in a broken voice, "Just heaven! if it should prove so, Oh! what would have become of your ladyship, had not these messengers arrived! It is providence that has sent them!"

Indora strained her young friend to her breast, and imprinted a kiss upon her pure polished forehead: then a sudden ejaculation burst from Indora, as the music suddenly ceased in the chamber overhead.

"What is it?" asked Christina: and her breath was suspended with a suspense most poignantly painful.

"It is all over!" responded the Princess: "the reptile is discovered and is destroyed. Hark to the joyous tones of those men's voices! But hither they come."

And it was so. The two emissaries were descending the stairs with much more rapid steps than when they had mounted them a few minutes back. The music was not renewed: it was therefore evident that all danger was past and gone. The door opened; and the senior messenger hastened into the room—where falling upon one knee at Indora's feet, he opened a towel which he carried in his hands, and displayed a cobra cut into three pieces. Those fragments of the reptile were yet writhing convulsively: but all real life was out of them—it was mere spasmodic action which the sections thus displayed—and the snake was incapable of mischief. But Christina averted her looks with ineffable loathing, as well as with a cold shuddering terror. The Princess herself flung but one glance on the remains of the deadly reptile; and in obedience to a sign from her, the messenger covered them up again with the towel. He spoke in answer to some question which the Princess put; and then she bade the junior emissary likewise approach. He also knelt; and the Princess, drawing from her fingers two rings of immense value, bestowed them respectively upon the two individuals who had thus saved her from destruction.

"Yes, my dear Christina," she said, again addressing herself in English to our heroine, and speaking in a voice of profound solemnity,—"Heaven has indeed interposed most signally in my favour. Tranquillize your feelings—exercise a command over yourself—while I tell you what I have just learnt from the lips of these men. It appears that the moment they entered my chamber, the instinct of the younger one convinced him in a moment that the reptile was *there*. Again I say compose yourself, Christina—although I confess that the bare idea makes even myself shudder. Yes—for forth from my bed—from beneath the clothes—from the very place where in another hour I should have lain myself down—glided the hideous reptile. Then was it that the music played more loudly and more rapidly, as we heard it; and the cobra began to dance upon the bedding according to the wont of its species when thus fascinated by a peculiar melody. But its very moments were numbered: for the keen weapon of the senior messenger, glancing like a lightning-flash, smote the reptile with unerring aim; and it lay severed, as you have just seen it, upon the bed which might under other circumstances have proved a bed of death to me!"

Christina was so overcome by her varied feelings,—thankfulness for Indora's providential escape, astonishment at the miraculous manner in which it had been accomplished, and horror at the thought of so deadly a reptile having been in the house,—that she nearly fainted. The Princess sustained her young friend in her arms, embracing her affectionately: Christina exerted a strong effort to regain her self-possession; and a flood of tears gave her effectual relief.

Mark was now summoned; and the result of the investigation was made known to him—an announcement which he received with feelings not far different from those which inspired Christina Ashton.

"I cannot understand, my lady," he said, "how such a reptile could be here: for the veriest child knows that there are none indigenous to this country. It must have escaped from the Zoological Gardens, or else from some itinerant menagerie: but heaven be thanked for its discovery and destruction, ere dread mischief was wrought by its venomous fangs!"

"I need not remind you, Mark," observed Indora, "how it suits my purpose to retain a strict *incognita* here; and how desirous I am therefore to avoid attracting any particular notice on the part of the public. It is therefore my pleasure that this occurrence be kept strictly secret; and you will enjoin the English domestics not to speak of it to their acquaintances, nor to make it a subject of gossip amongst the tradesmen with whom we deal. Mention this likewise to the interpreter who accompanies the messengers from my royal father."

Mark bowed and withdrew,—taking the towel and its loathsome contents away with him. We need hardly say that with the exception of Sagoonah, every one in the servants' hall was smitten with horror and astonishment on hearing what Mark had to relate, and on beholding the proofs of his story. But the wily ayah so well played her own part, that she seemed to be as much affected as the rest—or even more so. Mark and the groom went forth together to bury the fragments of the cobra in the garden; while Sagoonah, hastening up-stairs, glided into the drawing-room—and falling upon her knees at Indora's feet, took the hand of her Highness and pressed it to her lips, as if in congratulation at the escape of a well-beloved mistress. And Indora, who supposed herself to be thus well beloved, caressingly smoothed down the long dark hair of her slave,—at the same time thanking her for what she naturally conceived to be a proof of her affectionate devotion.

The messengers and the interpreter took their departure from the villa: but it was not until a late hour on this memorable night that the inmates retired to rest; for alike in the drawing-room and in the servants' hall there was much to converse upon.

On the following day Madame Angelique reappeared in that neighbourhood: for under all the circumstances which are known to the reader, she was deeply and painfully anxious to ascertain what progress Sagoonah was making in the diabolical enterprise she had undertaken,—whether it was as yet carried out,—and if not, when it would be. The ayah—more or less suspecting that the infamous woman would thus seek her, and wanting to be so sought—was on the look-out. She approached the fence where their colloquies were wont to be held; and Madame Angelique flew thither. At first she thought, by the cold, rigid, statue-like air of the darkly beautiful Hindoo, that the deed was already accomplished: in fact, so confident was she that such would be the announcement she was on the point of hearing, that she experienced an inward feeling of savage joy. Sagoonah seemed to penetrate what was passing in her mind: for she said in that voice of monotonous coldness which she so often was wont to adopt, "You are exulting without a cause: the Lady Indora yet lives—and is likely to live long."

"Sagoonah—my dear Sagoonah—these words from your lips!" exclaimed Madame Angelique, in mingled disappointment and dismay.

"Yes—those words from my lips," responded the ayah, coldly as before. "Last night the terrible project which you yourself suggested, was put in train—and it failed. I tell you that the Lady Indora possesses a charmed life," continued Sagoonah, with a sudden emphasis half solemn and half of passionate vehemence: "and heaven itself manifests its power on her behalf. To meditate further mischief against her, would be to fight against the deities themselves! I will not again dare such an unholy strife! Ask me not for details——I will give none!"

"But you must—you must!" exclaimed Madame Angelique; "for yesterday I visited the Gardens after you had left—I took care to inform myself that your party had been and was gone—I looked in the reptile-house—and, Sagoonah, the deadly cobra was missing!"

"And that cobra was taken away by my hand," rejoined Sagoonah, a terrific brightness suddenly flaming up in her large black eyes. "Think you therefore that the hand which dared grasp the reptile, trembled to deposit it in the couch of her to ensure whose death my own was dared? No!—I did all that your infernal wickedness suggested, and that my own fearful courage was enabled to accomplish. But heaven intervened wondrously—miraculously!—and the dead reptile—dread now no longer—is buried in this garden. I tell you, woman," added Sagoonah fiercely, "that those who serve the cause of Hell cannot possibly prevail against the blest of Heaven:—and the Lady Indora is thus blest! Begone—tempt me no more! All your arts and wiles—your cajoleries and your instigations—are vain and fruitless. Never more will I be led by them—never more will I bend to them! Begone, woman—and beware how you seek this place again!"

There was a wild eloquence in Sagoonah's language which corresponded effectually and impressively with her aspect, as she thus spoke. Her eyes burnt with a supernal lustre: they glowed in the magnificence of their brightness—their splendour was effulgent, but terrible and overpowering. Her nostrils dilated—her lips wreathed like those of a pythoness when enunciating prophecies with an inspiring frenzy. Her tall form was drawn up to its full height,—the swelling bosom upheaved beneath the white draperies that only partially concealed those contours as well rounded as if belonging to a statue of bronze;—and altogether the appearance of that Hindoo woman struck terror and dismay into the heart of Madame Angelique.

"Begone, I repeat!" exclaimed Sagoonah once more: and the milliner shrank cowering back from the fierce lightnings of the ayah's eyes.

Then Sagoonah turned slowly away from the fence, and gave no heed to the Frenchwoman's passionate entreaties that she would stop and listen to her. Madame Angelique waited for a few minutes in the last desperate hope that Sagoonah would yet come back: but she did not—and was presently lost amidst the dense foliage of the evergreens. Then the milliner was compelled to betake herself away from the neighbourhood of the villa,—so bewildered with what had occurred, and by the terrors which oppressed her guilty soul, that she knew not what course next to adopt: and again, as on a former occasion, she was pursued, surrounded, and hemmed in, by the sinister and unaccountable influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER LXX.

THE VAULT IN THE CHURCH.

THE scene now changes to one of those beautiful little villages which are to be found in Westmoreland,—where the hills protect the dwellings from the cold winds of winter, and where lakes and rivulets reflect in the summer-time the trees that stand upon their banks. The village to which we would now particularly direct the attention of our readers, was situated in a valley: it was more than half embowered by large trees, whose giant arms, covered with verdure, stretched over the cottages which formed the chief portion of that little assemblage of habitations. It was intersected by a stream, which, after turning the wheel of a watermill, passed under a rudely constructed wooden bridge—but all in appropriate keeping with the picturesque simplicity of the scene; and thence the rivulet pursued its course, embracing with its sinuosity two sides of the churchyard, and flowing on through the meadows until its serpentine form was lost in the distance. To this village it suits our purpose to give a fictitious name; and we will therefore, with the reader's permission, denominate it Woodbridge.

The church—standing in the midst of its sacred ground crowded with tombstones, many of which were old enough, and showed the remains of quaint and uncouth sculpturing—the others indicating the resting-places of the more recently deceased—was about a quarter of a mile apart from the village itself; and, as we have already said, the churchyard on two sides stretched down to the bank of the river, which there made an abrupt curve. Close by was the parsonage—a small old-fashioned house, built of bricks of a deep dingy red—with a little wooden portico, supported by two thin pillars; and there was a tolerably large garden attached to the dwelling. Not very far off was a small cottage—or rather hut; and here dwelt an old man named Carnabie, but who was more familiarly known in the village by his Christian name of Jonathan. He was between sixty and seventy; and for thirty years had filled the united offices of clerk, grave-digger, and bell-ringer in that parish. These situations his father had held before him—and very likely his grandsire also, for aught that we can tell to the contrary. During his parent's lifetime, he used to assist in digging the graves and in opening the vaults; and thus from his very childhood was he brought up to be accustomed to find himself in contact with the ceremonies, the memorials, and the relics of the dead. Perhaps it was this circumstance which had so far influenced his disposition as to render him somewhat cynical and morosely reserved: he had never married—he associated but little with the villagers—and it was a rare occurrence indeed for him to take a seat of an evening in the parlour of the *Green Dragon*. To his face he was invariably addressed as "Mr. Carnabie;" but behind his back he was spoken of as "Old Jonathan." It was reported that his habits were miserly, and that when a light was seen glimmering, at a late hour, through the window of his isolated cottage, he was counting over his hoarded coins. Others however said that he was fond of reading; and this rumour appeared to receive its justification from the fact that he was a constant borrower of books from the parson's library. That he was a strange and eccentric character, however, there could be no doubt; and that his feelings were somewhat morbid or peculiar, was equally certain, from the fact that he would just as soon dig a grave during the night as in the day-time, and that he was often known to visit the church during the hours when other people slept. The natural inference was that he was utterly exempt from superstitious fears, and likewise that as long habit had rendered him familiar with everything that concerned the dead, so he had a sort of hankering to be incessantly amidst their memorials, their resting-places, and their relics. In personal appearance he was sedate, and had even a venerable look, notwithstanding the cynical eccentricity bordering upon moroseness which marked his disposition and characterized his habits. He was tall and somewhat thin—exceedingly upright, as if years sate lightly upon him: he was still strong and active. Such was Mr. Jonathan Carnabie, clerk and sexton of the parish church of Woodbridge.

It was about twelve o'clock at night—the very same night on which the incidents of the cobra occurred at the Princess Indora's villa—that a man, rudely apparelled, and carrying a stick, which in reference to its dimensions might better be denominated a bludgeon, came wandering through the meadows which the river intersected after its sinuous course left the churchyard. It was a bright and beautiful night—so bright indeed that print of a moderate size might have been read: but all along the river's banks there was a mist—very thin, however, and of fleecy whiteness. The man dragged himself on with the painfulness of one who was either in ill-health or else had travelled a considerable distance. Yet he did not support himself on his stick: he for the most part kept it under his arm—or else every now and then took and flourished it with the vexation of a naturally savage disposition, or perhaps with the desire of meeting some one on whom, for predatory motives, it might be worth while to exercise his skill in wielding that formidable bludgeon. Perhaps, if we penetrate into the man's thoughts, and follow their course somewhat, we may be

enabled to ascertain the circumstances in which he is placed—and the readers will discover, if they have not already suspected, who he is.

"Well, I'm blest if ever a respectable genelman found his-self in such a precious mess as I am in now—nothink but the glory of having escaped out of the stone jug and knocked the turnkey ou the head, to cheer me up a bit. Here four days has gone since that there brilliant exploit on my part; and I've tramped a matter of a hundred mile, sneaking along like a half-starved dog—afeard every moment that some feller will tap me on the shoulder, saying, 'Now, then, Barney, you're wanted!'—But arter all, it's better to be free to wander through these here fields, even though I must presently stretch myself under a hedge or creep into a barn, with the chance of being took up as a wagrant and sent to the mill as a rogue and waggabone,—than to stop in Liverpool gaol with the certainty of dancing upon nothink. Well, this is a consolation: but I shouldn't mind having summut more consoling in the shape of a good hot supper and a jorum of grog. Four whole days and nights—living on charity—just what I could pick up at lonely cottages—and then only getting summut to eat cos why my looks isn't the pleasantest in the world—and when women is by theirselves, and their husbands is out, they don't like such a face as mine to be poked in upon them. Well, arter all, a ugly face has its adwantages: for when a chap is in distress, he gets in this way more than would be gived him if his looks was 'ansome, meek, and amiable. But I never see such a part of the country as this here is! Four whole days without meeting a single traveller that was worth stopping, except that jolly stout farmer which had his pistols and made me run for my life. It's a blackguard shame that the people in these parts don't travel as other Christians does, with their gold chains and their purses—or else that if they do, they carries pistols."

Here, to relieve his injured feelings, as he thus thought with ineffable disgust over his supposed wrongs, Mr. Barnes the Burker gave a terrific flourish with his huge bludgeon, as if he was aiming a desperate blow at the people of Lancashire and Westmoreland who would not come forth to be plundered. As he was pursuing his way, he came within sight of the village—the walls of some of the cottages gleaming white amidst the embowering trees. But there was no satisfaction nor cheering hope in the prospect for him. Without a penny in his pocket—conscious of his forbidding looks—dressed in sordid apparel, he was not insane enough to suppose that the door of any inn or private dwelling in that village would be opened to afford him a welcome reception. And then, too, he felt assured that a hue and cry had been raised the moment his escape was discovered—that advertisements had been sent to all the provincial newspapers—that handbills had most likely been circulated—and that therefore his position was anything but a safe and secure one. The reader cannot fail to have understood that, on being captured in London in the manner described in an earlier chapter, he had as a matter of course been transferred to that town which was the scene of the murder for which he would have to stand his trial along with Mrs. Webber, had he not escaped from the gaol. He was a veritable outcast in every sense and meaning of the term—penniless, houseless, foodless, and a wanderer.

Yet he drew nearer to the village with the hope that something might transpire to relieve his necessities—or else to afford him a barn, shed, or out-house where he could stretch his wearied limbs for a few hours ere pursuing his journey again. The path which he was threading through the fields, brought him to the gate of the churchyard; and as he sate to rest himself there for a few minutes, he fancied that he beheld a light glimmering through a small window, or loop-hole, at the very bottom of the wall of the church. The Burker was little prone to superstitious fears; and his curiosity was therefore excited. He entered the churchyard—he advanced towards the little window whence, as he had fancied, the light was really glimmering. This window was more than half-way below the actual level of the churchyard: but the earth had been cut away in a sloping manner towards it, so as to admit the air, if not the light of day, into the place to which it belonged. The Burker, passing amongst the tombstones, and trampling recklessly upon the graves, advanced nearer towards the little window—stooped down—and peeped in. There was an iron grating, but no glass to the window—if a window it could therefore be thus denominated; and the Burker could obtain a full view of the interior of the vault—for a vault it was. A short but massive pillar rose in the centre, supporting the arched ceiling, which was the floor of the church: several coffins were there—an immense lantern hung to an iron nail fixed in the wall—and an old man in a very plain garb was seated on a block of stone at the foot of the pillar. On the ground were several implements such as might have been used in raising the stone which covered the vault, and which therefore belonged to the pavement of the church. The glare of the lantern, which completely filled the vault, prevented Jonathan Carnabie—for he the old man was—from observing that the argentine beams of the night's splendour were now intercepted at the loophole by the form of an observer. He sate upon that stone, gazing slowly around on the coffins which were ranged against the sides of the vault; and though merely musing with himself, he nevertheless said loud enough to be overheard by the Burker, "Well, there's room sufficient to be sure: but then the question is, which is its most appropriate place?"

The coffins upon which the old man thus slowly bent his gaze, exhibited the proofs that they had been at very different periods consigned to that last resting-place of the shrouded dead whom they enclosed. There were coffins that were so dilapidated and broken it seemed as if the slightest touch would send them crumbling into dust—others which were somewhat better preserved—others again which evidently belonged to a still more recent period—and two or three which seemed as if it were only within the last few years that they had taken their places in the midst of that family receptacle.

"Well, it is strange," continued the old man in his audible musings, "that I can't at once hit upon the place where this new-comer shall be deposited to-morrow. I suppose my intellect is not as clear as it used to be; and I know that it takes me twice

as long to dig a grave in the yard as it did a matter of twenty years back. But then I'm twenty years older!—and perhaps I ought to be thinking of who will dig my own grave? Whoever he is, it won't be the same as the one who is to act as clerk: for when I am dead and gone, the offices are to be separated. *That* I know for a fact. I shall look out for an assistant: the people die fast in this village, small as it is: but then there's an astonishing number of old people here! It would really seem as if they had lived on with an understanding that when they all came to a certain date they should die off as fast as possible. Yes—I will have an assistant."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Jonathan Carnabie slowly and deliberately drew forth from his pocket a tolerably large flask; and it was also well filled, as the Burker could judge by the way in which the old man put it to his lips. The draught he took was a moderate one: and then he consigned the flask back again to his pocket.

"Yes—an assistant!" resumed Jonathan in his audible musings: "it is all very fine to talk about an assistant—but where is one to be found? If I cast my eye over all the stout young chaps at Woodbridge and round about, I cannot think of one that will in any way do. None of them like old Jonathan, as I know the rascals call me—— Heaven forgive me for using such a strong term as *rascals* in a church! But about the assistant—— where is he to be found?"

The old man paused, and took another small draught from his flask, as if he thought it would sharpen his intellects and help on his reflections. But now there were two circumstances which had acquired a peculiar interest for Mr. Barnes, whose countenance was cooling itself against the iron bar of the window. The first was that

the old sexton wanted an assistant; and the Burker saw at a glance that the situation would suit him for the present most admirably, inasmuch as it would give him bread and a bed to sleep in; and of all places in the world an out-of-the-way secluded village such as this, was perhaps the best calculated to yield him a refuge against the consequences of a hue and cry. His original intention was to push on into the wildest parts of Scotland: but his experiences of an outcast condition were already painful enough to make him wish for something settled, even though it might be nearer to Liverpool than prudence would have exactly suggested. The hope, therefore, of becoming the old sexton's assistant was one of the results arising from his accidental listening at the loop-hole of the vault. The other was the spectacle of the brandy-flask, which the Burker longed to apply to his lips. But how was he to introduce himself to the old man? Hark! Jonathan Carnabie resumes his musings.

"Yes—I am resolved to have an assistant—that's settled! But I must have one that will do my bidding in all things without being questioned—that will be tutored into taking as much pride in digging a neat grave and having a care of these vaults as I do myself. Now where is such a person to be found?"

"Here!" answered the Burker: for it struck him at the instant that this was the best, as assuredly it was the shortest, way of introducing himself to the notice of the individual whose patronage he sought.

The old sexton started, perhaps for the first time in his life smitten with a superstitious terror: but quickly recovering his self-possession, his first thought was that he must have been deceived by some unusual sound. He nevertheless instinctively looked towards the loop-hole; and on perceiving that the light of the shining heavens was intercepted by a human form, his next impression was that some belated villager was bent on playing off a joke upon him.

"You have nothing to do with me or my concerns," said Jonathan. "Go your ways back to the *Green Dragon*—unless they have shut up—and in decency they ought—in which case go to your bed."

"I don't happen to have never an acquaintance with the *Green Dragon*," responded the Burker; "and as for seeking the bed I last slept in—— But no matter!" he interrupted himself, as his thoughts had wandered back to the narrow iron bedstead, the hard mattress, and the horsecloth coverlid in the gaol whence he had escaped. "I'm not a native of this here willage, though as respectable for a poor man as any that is."

"How came you here?" asked Jonathan bluntly.

"I'm out of work," responded the Burker—as indeed he *was* out of the work which constituted his ordinary occupation before his capture. "I'm on the tramp—I was passing through the churchyard—I saw the light—but not being afeard of ghostesses, I peeped in."

"Not afraid, eh?" said old Jonathan, to whom this was at once a recommendation on the Burker's behalf.

"More afeard of the living than the dead," replied the Burker: "cos why there's a many people in this world as goes about like roaring lions seeking how they may devour innocent and unwary chaps like me."

"Rather pious after your own fashion?" said Jonathan Carnabie.

"Wery pious," responded the Burker,—"but unassuming, unpretending, doing whatever I'm bid without axing a question—and uncommon strong and active at work."

"And where do you come from?" asked Jonathan.

"From Gowler—a good way off," replied Mr. Barnes; so that this vague response might have embraced any point of the compass and any conceivable distance.

"But where from?" inquired Jonathan, who though to a certain extent simple-minded through having dwelt all his life in that village, was nevertheless precise and circumstantial enough in his habits to require definite replies to his questions.

"I'm a Lincolnshire man," said the Burker, with a tone of uncommon frankness. "As I have already told you, I'm out of work. The last job I did was for Farmer Nuggans——perhaps you have heerd talk of him?"

"I can't say that I have," responded the old man. "But you had better step round into the church, and we will talk over the matter here. A few steps to the right will bring you to a little door; and the light from the vault will guide you."

Jonathan Carnabie evidently thought that the vault was the most comfortable place to sit and discourse in; and it was perfectly indifferent to the Burker where he deposited himself so long as he had a chance of carrying out his aims. He proceeded to the little door—he entered the church—and the light from the vault, glimmering feebly, seemed to be a dim, uncertain, ghostly halo hanging about the dead. But the moonbeams were shining through the windows; and they helped to subdue the light of the lantern, or to render it more sickly. They fell upon the pews of dark wood—upon the pulpit standing against one of the thick pillars—and upon three or four monuments with the sculptured effigies of the long defunct warriors whose remains had been buried there. It was evidently a very old church:—in former times there had been a castle in the neighbourhood; and hence the monuments to which we have referred. The silence which prevailed until broken by the Burker's heavy stamping feet, would have struck solemnly to the soul of any other man, and would have induced him to tread lightly: but he was totally unsusceptible of such impressions—and he went tramping along the aisle, indifferent to the mournful echoes which his nailed boots raised, and which might have been taken for the meanings of the spirits of the departed as they died away under the groined roofs at the farther extremity.

On reaching the mouth of the vault, Barney the Burker descended into it by a flight of stone steps; and he very deliberately seated himself upon a coffin near the block of stone on which Jonathan Carnabie was placed. The old man started at what he considered to be an act of impious desecration: but the Burker, not comprehending the meaning of that movement, fancied it was produced by a nearer view of his own hang-

dog features; and he exclaimed, "I tell you what it is, my old friend—I know I'm not so 'ansome as some people is; but I'm a deuced sight better: for try me at hard work, or question me as to my morals, or anythink of that sort, and you'll just see what an admirable feller I am."

"I was not thinking of your personal appearance," replied the old sexton: "but I wish you would get off that coffin and go and sit down upon the steps."

"To be sure!" exclaimed the Burker, obeying with alacrity: and then bethinking himself of the sexton's brandy-flask, he gave a visible shudder,—observing, "It's uncommon cold notwithstanding the season of the year."

"Refresh yourself," said Jonathan; and he handed the flask.

"Your wery good health, sir—and here's wishing you a long life and a merry von," said Mr. Barnes, by way of complimentary preface to a somewhat prolonged application to the contents of the flask.

"A merry life!" exclaimed old Jonathan: "how can you talk in such a light strain? What can the merriment be for one who has all his days been accustomed to dwell amongst the dead, so that the gloom of vaults and sepulchres and the damp of graves have become habitual to him? But you were saying just now that you were the man who would become my assistant——"

"And an uncommon handy feller you'll find me, I can tell you," rejoined the Burker. "But how is it I find you in this here place at such an hour of the night? I don't say it isn't agreeable enough—I like it uncommon—it's quite a change—and wariety is charming."

"This vault," answered old Jonathan solemnly, "belongs to the Featherstones of Featherstone Hall. It's a very old family—and all these coffins that you see around, contain scions of that race. Another—a promising young man as ever you could wish to see—died a few days ago; and he will be buried here to-morrow. There was a marriage in the church this morning—and I could not find it in my heart to raise the stone of this vault till the evening——"

"And you don't mean to say you did it by yourself?" exclaimed the Burker.

"No—I had an assistant in the task," rejoined Jonathan: "but the instant it was over, he hurried away, frightened at the gloom of the building when once the dusk had set in. You see that *I* am not frightened: I came and sate myself down here to determine where the coffin should be put to-morrow——and now you know how it is that you find me in such a place at such an hour."

"If I was your assistant," remarked the Burker, "instead of running away the moment work was over, I should like to come down into these here places and have a chat—more partikler when there's the brandy-flask to keep the cold out of one's throat."

Jonathan Carnabie deliberated with himself for a few minutes; and having decided upon engaging the services of the man who had so singularly offered himself, he proceeded to specify the duties which an assistant would have to perform, as well as the present emoluments which he would receive, —observing as an additional inducement, that if Barney conducted himself well he might be certain of succeeding to the office of grave-digger at his (Jonathan's) death. The Burker accepted the proffered terms; and the bargain was sealed with another drain from the brandy-flask.

"And now, my good man," said Jonathan, "as you are doubtless weary and hungered, I will take you to my cottage where you can refresh and repose yourself for to-night; and to-morrow I can perhaps help you to a cheap lodging with some humble but respectable people."

"I've already took such an affection for you, sir," answered the Burker, "that if you've only got some old shed or out-house belonging to your place, I would make myself as happy and comfortable as a king. I could turn my hand to a thousand little odd jobs——"

"Well, well, we shall see about it," replied the sexton. "Meantime follow me."

They issued from the vault, and passed out of the church,—Jonathan having previously extinguished his lantern. He locked the door with a huge key; and striking into a narrow path, led the way through the churchyard. The Burker was not particular in keeping to the path; but he now and then trampled over the graves,—which being presently perceived by the old man, caused him suddenly to stop short.

"You must not set foot upon any one of these sacred hillocks," he said, with his wonted gravity: "and for two reasons. In the first place because it's desecration; and in the second place because there are certain families—aye, even amongst the poorest—who pay a trifle annually to have the graves of their deceased relatives kept in good order——Not but that I devote my care to those for which no fee is paid——And here, for instance," added the old man, again stopping short after having slowly walked on a few paces,—"here is the best kept grave in the whole place: and yet I have never received a farthing for attending to it."

He pointed to a grave which had a stone at its head; and in the beautiful clearness of the night, it was easy for the Burker to perceive that it was indeed well kept,—the turf being all smooth over the hillock, and brambles stretched across to prevent any intrusive sheep from nibbling at the grass.

"Look! You perceive there is no name upon that stone," said the sexton,—"nothing but the date of the deceased's death——*October*, 1830."

"And why is there no name?" asked the Burker.

"Because the name which the poor deceased lady possessed, was never known," replied Jonathan Carnabie. "She was a stranger—and she died mad——Yes, it was a deep, silent, brooding madness——But it is a sad tale, and I cannot tell it you now."

"Who died mad? who died in the midst of a deep, brooding madness?" exclaimed a wild voice suddenly breaking in upon the momentary silence, which followed the old sexton's remark; and at the same time a female, having the appearance of a crazed gipsy, appeared upon the spot as if she had arisen out of the earth or sprung up from behind one of the adjacent tombstones. "Who died mad, I ask you?" she repeated vehemently. "There are indeed sorrows in this world sufficient to turn the strongest brain—and I have seen those

who have felt them——Yes, and I have experienced them too!"

"My good woman," said the old sexton, "what are you doing here at this time of night? where do you come from? and who are you?"

"I know no more whence I come," exclaimed the woman in a species of wild frenzy, "than the wind itself does. Who I am, matters not to you. But who are *you?*"—and her bright eyes were fixed upon the old sexton—for she did not appear to notice the Burker, who had shrunk back a few paces at her sudden appearance.

"My name is Jonathan Carnabie," was the old man's sententious reply. "I am clerk, bellringer, and sexton to this church—and yonder is my habitation."

"And you have spoken of a poor lady who died mad?" said the crazed creature—for such indeed she was. "I would fain ask you a few questions; but they go out of my brain—something has agitated and excited me—I cannot collect my thoughts now:"—and she pressed her hand to her forehead. "Another time—another time!" she abruptly exclaimed: and darting away, passed through the gate and was speedily out of sight.

"The poor creature is demented," said Jonathan Carnabie; "and she catches up anything she may hear fall from the lips of a stranger. Poor woman! she has doubtless some heavy grief upon her mind! But come along——I had temporarily forgotten that you must be in want of refreshment and repose."

The old sexton accordingly led the way out of the churchyard,—Barnes the Burker following him in silence: for he did not altogether like the strange apparition of that poor crazy woman.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE MOUNTEBANK.

We must now return to Ramsgate, to take up the thread of our narrative at the moment when we left Christian Ashton rushing out of the Royal Hotel, after having so earnestly bidden Edgar Beverley await his return. Our young hero had a particular aim in view: for it will be remembered that he had just been suggesting to his new friend the necessity of communicating with the imprisoned Laura at Verner House, in order to ascertain by what means her interests could be served or her escape effected. He had bethought himself of the mountebank with whom he had that day conversed in the streets of Ramsgate relative to Baron Raggidbak; and he was now speeding in search of that public performer.

He had proceeded some distance in the joyous excitement of the idea which had thus struck him, before he began to reflect that it was scarcely probable he should find the mountebanks displaying their antics at that time in the evening—for it was now past nine o'clock. He relaxed his pace, and took time to breathe and to deliberate. In a few moments an individual passed him at a somewhat rapid rate; and he recognised the unmistakable form of the starveling Baron Raggidbak. He was about to rush after the ex-Groom of the Stole, when he beheld that once high and mighty nobleman plunge into an obscure court—and he was immediately lost to our hero's view.

"He must live with the rest," thought Cristian to himself; "and they therefore must be dwelling hereabouts."

He accordingly turned into the same court; but his progress was almost immediately arrested by several persons of both sexes that came pouring forth from a public-house; and though the group was small in number, yet it was quite sufficient to choke up the narrow place. The excitement was produced by a desperate combat between two men, both of whom were much intoxicated. Baron Raggidbak had evidently passed along ere the portals of that public-house vomited forth its inebriate frequenters: for he was nowhere to be seen amongst the crowd. Christian was soon enabled to force his way amidst the excited group; but his progress had nevertheless been delayed for more than a minute; and as he hurried along the dimly lighted court, the German was nowhere to be seen. There was no outlet at the farther extremity; and therefore it was quite clear that the Baron must have entered one of the houses in that court. Christian stepped up to a man who was standing on the threshold of a door gazing in the direction of the pugilists and their backers; and he inquired if the man happened to know whether the mountebanks who had that day been performing in Ramsgate, resided anywhere in the court?

"Why, yes, sir," was the man's response: "they're lodging here in my house: but if so be any one of 'em has wrongfully taken to prigging, and you've lost summut, I hope you won't make no noise over it: for I see by your cut that you are a regular gentleman, every inch of you——"

"I can assure you," interrupted Christian, "that I have no such ground of complaint—and indeed no complaint whatsoever to make. But I wish to speak to one of those men."

"Step in, sir," said the man: "and you may see 'em all at supper as happy as kings—with the exception of the German cove, which didn't like the beautiful dish of tripe and cow-heel that my missus took so much trouble to dish up for 'em—— so he must needs go and buy hisself some German sassage—and he's only just this minit come back."

"Thank you—I would rather not walk in," replied Christian, who was by no means anxious to encounter the ex-Groom of the Stole: "but if I described to you the particular individual whom I wish to see, could you not whisper a word in his ear?"

"To be sure, sir," exclaimed the lodging-house keeper, "But dear me! how them chaps is a fighting! It's Bill Rough-and-Ready, which is a costermonger—and Tom Kagmag, which sells cats'-meat——"

"Never mind those ruffians," interrupted Christian, by no means interested in the names or avocations of the pugilists. "Have the kindness to listen to me while I describe the particular mountebank that I wish to converse with:"—then having given the description, Christian added, "Whisper in his ear that the young gentleman from whom he received two shillings this afternoon, desires to say five words to him."

The lodging-house keeper passed into his dwelling to execute this commission; and while Christian remained standing upon the threshold, he saw

that the pugilistic encounter was abruptly brought to an amicable close by the two combatants shaking hands at the instigation of the landlord of the public-house, who came forth thus to act as mediator; so that in a few moments the court was cleared of the uproarious rabble, who plunged back again through the portals of the boozing-ken. Almost immediately afterwards the lodging-house keeper re-appeared, followed by the mountebank, who was now dressed in plain clothes of a very poor and shabby aspect. On perceiving our hero, he made a profound salutation; and Christian, drawing him out into the court, said, "I have no doubt you are surprised that I should seek you here—but to come to the point at once, I think you can do me a service—and I need scarcely add that you will be liberally recompensed."

The mountebank joyously expressed his willingness to serve our young hero,—who, having enjoined him to observe the strictest secrecy and discretion, explained the nature of the object which he had in view. The mountebank cheerfully undertook it; and they separated,—our young hero's last words being, "You will be sure, therefore, to come to the hotel in the morning for the note."

Having delivered this parting instruction, Christian sped back to rejoin his friend Edgar Beverley, to whom he explained the arrangements which he had just settled with the itinerant performer. The young lieutenant was well pleased with our hero's plan; and he thanked him warmly for the generous interest he was thus exhibiting on his behalf. He penned a letter for Laura, so that it might be ready when the mountebank should call for it in the morning; and when he and Christian had deliberated some little while longer upon the project which was thus settled, they retired to rest.

It was about noon on the following day that the mountebanks might have been seen marching upon their stilts through the fields in the neighbourhood of Verner House. In proportion as their forms were exalted into the air, so had their spirits seemed to rise: for they were laughing and joking merrily amongst themselves,—one of them every now and then cutting some extraordinary caper—or perhaps pausing to play off a practical joke upon poor Baron Raggidbak, who was toiling on with his huge drum slung behind him and his mouth-organ stuck in his buttoned-up coat, ready for melodious use at any moment. The ex-Groom of the Stole—never a good-tempered man in the best of times—had been still more soured and embittered by vicissitude and adversity: and thus, when one of the mountebanks, lifting up a stilt, knocked his hat over his eyes—or when another knocked it off—or when a third, still more mischievously inclined, inflicted a smart blow with a stilt against the Baron's spindle shanks,—he gave vent to his rage in low but deeply uttered German imprecations, and cursed the necessity which held him in such companionship.

But perhaps the reader would like to be informed how it was that his lordship had fallen from his high estate as Groom of the Stole, and had sunk down into the beater of a drum and the player of a set of pandean pipes in the train of a troop of mountebanks. It cannot have been forgotten that though performing the part of the Grand Duke's Groom of the Stole in the English metropolis, and there enjoying the style and distinction of Baron Raggidbak,—yet when at home in his native city of Quotha (if a city the trumpery place deserved to be called) the worthy German was nothing more than a stable-groom, and his patrician title became lost amidst all other wild and preposterous fictions. But Raggidbak—for this was really his surname—had so managed by hook and by crook to eat and to drink of the best when in the British metropolis, that he found it somewhat difficult to accommodate himself, on his return to Quotha, to the filthy sour-crout and the beer of choleraic acidity which constituted the staple refreshments in the servants' hall at the ducal palace of Quotha—and not merely in the servants' hall, but now and then in the ducal dining-room itself, when cash was short through non-arrival of subsidies from England. Raggidbak therefore missed the wine and the ale, the fat capons and the substantial steaks, which he had enjoyed at Mivart's; and in order to supply himself with creature comforts more to his taste than the crout and beer which vied with each other in sourness, he made away with some of the stable-gear and harness belonging to his ducal master. It being perceived that Raggidbak was very often drunk—and the Grand Duke well knowing that his dependant had no honest nor legitimate means of thus disguising himself in liquor—ordered an inquiry to take place; and behold! the once illustrious Baron Raggidbak, who had been addressed as "my lord" in England, was suddenly discovered and proclaimed to be a petty larcenist. His ignominious dismissal from the ducal service was the immediate consequence; and with an equally unfeeling abruptness—as he considered it to be—he was ordered to betake himself beyond the frontier of the Grand Duchy. This latter part of the sentence was however no real hardship, inasmuch as a comparatively pleasant walk taken in any direction from the ducal capital, would bring an individual to the frontier of that paltry little State. To be brief, it was under these circumstances that the injured and ill-used Raggidbak quitted his native city and the ducal service, and made his way into Belgium. But having no regular and formal passports in his possession, and being looked upon in the common light of a rogue and vagabond, he received a hint from the police-authorities that he had better leave the country; and on arriving at Ostend, he was provided with a free passage across to Dover. Thus, on arriving in England, this worthy gentleman of broken fortunes was only too glad to accept employment in the company of the mountebanks.

Returning from our digression, we take up the thread of our narrative. It was about noon, as we have said, when the itinerant performers—attended by the German who was alike their musician and their butt—were passing through the fields in the neighbourhood of Verner House. On reaching the front of that mansion, Baron Raggidbak began to beat his drum and to blow away at the pandean pipes: while his stilted companions commenced their wonted antics—dancing, capering, and waving wands with ribbons attached to them. At first Sir John Steward was seized with indignation at the idea of a set of persons, whom he regarded as thieves and vagabonds, daring to show off in front of his mansion,—the more so inasmuch as they had presumed to open the carriage-gate

and pass into the enclosure. Being in the commission of the peace, he vowed that he would send them all to the treadmill, where instead of capering upon stilts, they should dance upon an everlasting staircase, to the drumming and piping of the starveling German, if the governor of the gaol thought fit to allow such exercise of his musical powers. Now, we must observe that the old Baronet, Mrs. Oxenden, and Laura were all three seated in the drawing-room at the time when the itinerant performers appeared in front of the mansion. Laura was deeply dejected, and so completely out of spirits that neither by threats nor by cajolery could Mrs. Oxenden draw her out from that desponding apathy. The position of affairs was most embarrassing for Mrs. Oxenden: she feared lest Sir John Steward should become sickened or disgusted and back out of the purpose which he had hitherto entertained. She therefore caught all in a moment at the presence of these mountebanks as the possible means of inspiring her young sister with some little tinge of gaiety, if only for a few transient minutes.

"The rogues and scoundrels!" ejaculated Sir John, who was in an exceeding ill-humour at the dead lethargic coldness of the beautiful Laura: "I will have them every one sent to the House of Correction, I repeat! Here—let the footmen come—I'll swear them in as constables—it is a regular breach of the peace—I'll read the riot act—I'll—I'll—play the very devil!"

"Let them proceed, Sir John," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden, darting upon him a significant look with her superb eyes: and then, in a hasty whisper, she added, "Everything must be done to amuse and cheer Laura's mind at present."

"Aye, to be sure!" exclaimed the Baronet: "they may be honest, well-intentioned people after all. Poor fellows! I have wronged them—they are doing their best to pick up an honest penny—and as there just happens to be a halfpenny on the mantel-piece——"

"Nonsense, Sir John!" said Mrs. Oxenden aside: for we should observe that the meanness of the Baronet in some things was proportionate with his lavish extravagance in disbursing gold upon his own sensuous pleasures.

Mrs. Oxenden took out several shillings from her purse; and going forth upon the balcony, she flung them out to the mountebanks, who speedily picked them up. Returning into the room, she accosted her sister, saying, "You know not, my dear Laura, what surprising feats these gymnastic performers are displaying. It is quite entertaining—I feel as if I were a child once more, and could enter into the spirit of them:"—then stooping her head towards Laura's ear, she added, "Come, my dear girl, do cheer up a little—shake off this dreadful despondency——you know that I have nothing but your best interests at heart."

"My best interests?" said the young maiden, looking up with an air so woe-begone that it would have melted any heart save one of hardest flint.

"Yes—to be sure," whispered Mrs. Oxenden, hastily and also petulantly. "Am I to explain it to you all over and over again? But come, my dear Laura—go out for a few minutes on the balcony—the fresh air will do you good—and the feats of these men will divert you."

Thus speaking, Mrs. Oxenden took her young sister's hand, and led her towards the window: for Laura had relapsed into a state of deepest dejection, so that she suffered herself to be guided as if she were an automaton. She passed out upon the balcony; and Mrs. Oxenden remained with her for a few minutes. At first Laura contemplated the mountebanks in a kind of listless vacant manner: but by degrees her eyes seemed to display more interest in their proceedings; and Mrs. Oxenden, believing that she was really cheered, returned into the drawing-room to impart this intelligence to the old Baronet. The truth was that Laura did experience just that small amount of interest which a mind, sunk deep in lethargic despondency, was calculated to feel at any trifling circumstance that might break in upon the deeply mournful monotony of her thoughts. And yet it was rather the eye than the mind that was thus attracted—for while the poor young lady followed with her looks the exploits of the itinerants, her soul still continued brooding on the afflictions which haunted it.

But she was now alone upon the balcony. The wind blew sharp from the north-east, though the sun was shining brightly; and she drew around her the shawl which her sister had thrown over her shoulders ere conducting her out upon that balcony. One of the mountebanks came close under the window, and suddenly drew forth something from the breast of his party-coloured jacket. Laura observed the action—but considered it to be some part of the performance.

"One word!" said the mountebank; "one word! Quick, young lady!—are you Miss Hall?"

"Yes—that is my name," was Laura's hasty response: for she instantaneously perceived there was something significant in the man's proceedings; and to one in her desperate position the veriest trifle appeared like a straw of hope floating past and to be clutched at by her hand.

"This note!" rejoined the mountebank: "take it quick!—it is from Mr. Beverley! We will return to perform again to-morrow at the same hour; and you can then give me the answer."

It were impossible to describe the wild feelings of joy which thrilled through the frame of the beauteous young maiden as these words reached her ear. She trembled with those emotions for a few instants: she was bewildered with a sense of relief, hope, and happiness. The mountebank made an impatient gesture—the young lady, recalled thereby to her self-possession, flung a rapid glance behind her into the drawing-room—and perceiving that her sister and the old Baronet were in earnest conversation together—she took the note from the hand of the friendly performer. The next instant he was dancing and capering away on the top of his stilts with greater elasticity than ever; and in the effusion of his joy at having so successfully executed his commission, he bestowed (with one of the stilts aforesaid) so hearty a thwack across Raggidbak's shoulders that the mouth-organ for an instant sent forth a peculiar sound which seemed to be composed of a yell and a growl.

Laura had thrust the note into the bosom of her dress; and then she exerted all her powers to avoid the outward betrayal of her feelings that were

now so different from those which a few minutes back she had experienced. Mrs. Oxenden returned to the balcony—and said, "You are diverted, Laura?"

"Yes!" replied the young lady, scarcely able to repress a gush of emotions: "more—much more than I could possibly have anticipated!"

"I am glad of it," said Mrs. Oxenden: "we will have these men again to-morrow."

Laura was about to give expression to a joyous affirmative, when she was struck by the imprudence of displaying too much interest in these proceedings—and she accordingly held her peace. Her unprincipled sister summoned one of the itinerants towards the balcony; and this individual happened to be the bearer of the letter—as indeed he was also the leader of the troop.

"Do you purpose, my good man," inquired Mrs. Oxenden "to remain in this neighbourhood for a day or two?"

"Well, ma'am," replied the fellow, with the ready-witted impudence which, harmless enough, characterizes his class,—"we had a particular engagement to be at Canterbury to-morrow, to perform in the presence of the Archbishop, his clergy, and all the surrounding nobility and gentry: but if it is your pleasure, ma'am, that we shall attend here again, I'm sure we would put off all the Archbishops in the world rather than disappoint you and the young lady."

"In that case," rejoined Mrs. Oxenden, smiling, "you must come hither again to-morrow at the same hour—and here is your retaining fee."

Another silver coin found its way to the hand of the mountebank; and he shortly afterwards departed with his comrades—of course including Baron Raggidbak. On their return into the town, the mountebank at once put off his professional costume—dressed himself in his plain clothes—and proceeded to the Royal Hotel, where Edgar Beverley and Christian were anxiously awaiting his arrival. He communicated to them the result of his mission—and gladdened them still more by the intelligence that circumstances were so far favouring their views that his mountebank troop had actually been engaged to return to perform in front of Verner House on the morrow. The heart of Edgar Beverley was now elate with hope; and fervid indeed were his expressions of gratitude for the counsel and assistance afforded him by our young hero. The mountebank was liberally rewarded; and he took his departure, promising to fulfil his engagement on the morrow. Lieutenant Beverley was careful to keep in-doors throughout that day, for fear lest the old Baronet or Mrs. Oxenden might happen to pay a visit to Ramsgate and encounter him in the streets if he were imprudent enough to leave the hotel. Christian kept him company for the greater portion of the day—merely issuing out to take a walk for an hour or two: but during his ramble he saw nothing of either Sir John Steward or Mrs. Oxenden. The two young gentlemen dined together in the evening; and the result of the morrow's proceedings was awaited with some degree of suspense—in which however hope was predominant.

CHAPTER LXXII.

MRS. OXENDEN.

It was evening: and Laura had just retired to her own chamber, at about half-past nine o'clock, under the plea of a severe headache. Her real motive was however to find an opportunity for penning an answer to Edgar Beverley's note; and it was only by thus withdrawing at a somewhat early hour that she could hope to find such an occasion—for her chamber was an inner one opening from that occupied by her sister, who thus took care to act as the guardian by night of the young maiden, so as to prevent the possibility of escape. Laura had read her lover's billet: it had filled her with hope, and joy, and gratitude; and though she had done her best to wear the same demeanour as before, yet she had not been altogether able to prevent herself from appearing to be in better spirits.

On retiring to her room, she speedily dismissed the maid who came to attend upon her night-toilet; and she was about to sit down to pen a hasty reply to Edgar's note, when she heard the outer door open; and she had only just time to recover from her confusion and trepidation, when Mrs. Oxenden made her appearance. We ought perhaps to observe that Laura was entirely ignorant—and that the purity of her mind prevented her from suspecting—that her sister's antecedents were not the most correct in the world, and that she had been the kept mistress of several wealthy persons, amongst whom was Sir John Steward.

Mrs. Oxenden, on entering her chamber, embraced her sister with every appearance of the most affectionate cordiality; and in a tone which seemed fraught with a corresponding sincerity, she said, "Dearest Laura, you know not how happy I am to perceive that you are beginning to cheer up—or at all events that you are not quite so depressed as you have hitherto been. You may think, Laura, that I have played a harsh part towards you: but I was merely doing my duty as a sister who is so much older than yourself that you stand in the light of a daughter towards me."

Laura made no answer: she could scarcely believe that her sister spoke in exact accordance with the truth; and yet it revolted against the natural generosity of her nature to arrive at a contrary conclusion.

"I am sure that you are making up your mind to be reasonable," continued Mrs. Oxenden: "I felt confident that when your mind became sufficiently calm for deliberate reflection, you would see how completely I have been studying your best interests. But you spoke to me this morning in the drawing-room as if you fancied it was otherwise; and perhaps I answered you impatiently, and even unkindly, when I appeared to upbraid you for compelling me to give the same explanations over and over again. I am sorry, dear Laura, if I did thus speak somewhat too hastily; and I was determined to take the first opportunity to remove that impression from your mind."

Laura gazed with her beautiful blue eyes

earnestly upon her sister's countenance, as if seeking for the assurance that a real affectionate sincerity characterized all that she had just said; and Mrs. Oxenden could scarcely prevent her looks from quailing beneath that gaze of artless innocence.

"Yes, my dear sister," resumed the wily woman, taking Laura's hand and pressing it between both her own as if with the tenderest cordiality, "I am indeed studying your best interests in everything that I suggest or propose. Suffer me—for the last time, I hope—to reason with you a little upon certain points, and thereby aid you in strengthening your mind and assisting you onward in that better course of feelings which you have for the last few hours displayed. You know, Laura, that Mr. Oxenden's means are limited—that it is a Government pension which he enjoys—and that it will die with him. Therefore at his death—which according to all natural probabilities will take place long before my own—I shall be left with such small income as will arise from my husband's present savings and from an insurance on his life. Hitherto, my dear sister, I have been enabled to support you in comfort if not in affluence; and upon this ground alone I might claim some right to your dutiful obedience, as if I were your mother. But let us view the matter in a different light. You are now of an age when you ought to think of settling in the world. If Mr. Oxenden were to die soon—before you were thus settled—that income which would be a bare maintenance for me, would constitute absolute poverty for yourself and me; and without the means of going into society, how could you hope to form an eligible alliance——"

A burning blush overspread the countenance of the young maiden, as she said with more firmness than her timid nature was wont to allow her to display towards her sister, "You know that my heart is already engaged: think you therefore that I can possibly listen with a very pleasant feeling to this language of yours, in which you speak of eligible alliances as if they were such mere worldly matters——"

"And so they are!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden vehemently: for she in a moment saw the necessity of re-asserting her empire over her delicate-minded sister. "I know full well to what you allude—you would speak of Edgar Beverley: but have I not already told you that according to some long-lost document which has recently come to light, and the existence of which was previously unknown or forgotten, Sir John Steward is enabled to cut off the entail of his estates and to bequeath them to whomsoever he may choose? Have I not likewise informed you over and over again that his solicitor is already taking the necessary steps for this purpose, and that he will most probably be here the day after to-morrow with the marriage-settlements completed——and likewise," added Mrs. Oxenden impressively, "with the draught of Sir John Steward's will—that will by virtue of which you are at his death to inherit the great bulk of his wealth,—a comparatively small sum being bequeathed to me, and which I am sure my own sister will not grudge me?"

"Oh, if you knew how painful it is to me," cried Laura, with a visible shudder, "to hear you thus speculating upon death——"

But then she stopped suddenly short, as the idea struck her that it was useless as well as impolitic to argue upon the point; inasmuch as she was secretly resolved in her own mind never to wed Sir John Steward—and inasmuch too as against her fluttering heart rested the billet which had that day brought assurances of love, of succour, and of hope.

"I see my dear girl," continued Mrs. Oxenden, who did not rightly comprehend what was passing in her sister's mind, "that you are doing your best to exercise a becoming control over your feelings—and that when they threaten to get the better of you, you magnanimously check yourself. I am sure that this reiteration of all I have previously told you, has its uses and its advantages: and therefore—for the last time, I hope, as I just now said—I will recapitulate those reasonings which I have adopted towards you before. You are aware that Sir John Steward sent for me from Brighton, declaring in his letter that he had a most important communication to make to me; this communication was to the effect that as the conduct of his nephew had been most unduteous in many respects——"

"Do not vilify Edgar Beverley!" interrupted Laura, unable to restrain herself when aspersions were thrown out against her lover.

"Well, Laura," continued Mrs. Oxenden, "I will speak in terms as delicate as possible. Putting all Sir John Steward's reasons out of the question, the substantive fact remains that he determined to avail himself of the recently discovered document to break off the entail and dispose of his property—which is immense—according to his own goodwill and pleasure. It is his purpose to make such a settlement that will leave Mr. Beverley in possession of the two hundred pounds which have hitherto been granted to him as an allowance. It is true that at his death Mr. Beverley may, under certain circumstances, succeed to the title: but even if it should be so, what is a title without wealth adequate to its support? A mere encumbrance! To what, then, is Edgar Beverley reduced? To the condition of a poor subaltern, with a couple of hundred a year besides his pay. Would you throw yourself into his arms, when on the other hand you may become the bride of a man who is enormously rich, and whose rank will be reflected on yourself?"

Laura was again on the point of giving a hasty and even indignant answer to these cold-blooded mercenary calculations of her sister; when she was once more struck by the inutility of the course, as well as by the impolicy of saying aught that could possibly excite a suspicion in Mrs. Oxenden's mind.

"As yet Mr. Beverley," continued the latter lady, who, with all her penetration and cunning, could not fathom what was really passing in her sister's mind, and who therefore believed that her own arguments were making the wished-for impression—"as yet Mr. Beverley is in total ignorance of the existence of that document which enables his uncle to disinherit him. He clings to the belief—as indeed he himself assured me at Brighton not long since—that he is the heir presumptive to Sir John's estates, which he supposes to be inalienable so far as the rigour of the entail is concerned. But he will find himself mistaken. Sir John does not however wish that the intelli-

gence should be communicated to him until all proceedings now pending be finished and settled. My dear Laura, what more need I urge? what more need I say? On the one hand a title and wealth await you: on the other hand a title perhaps, but inevitable poverty. And then you must consider, my dear sister, that you owe some duteousness and gratitude towards me;—and by assenting to this marriage with Sir John Steward, you will place me beyond the reach of anxious cares for the future."

"Enough, sister—enough!" said Laura. "I have nothing to reply to your arguments."

Mrs. Oxenden could scarcely keep back an exclamation of wild tumultuous joy, as interpreting her sister's response according to her own wishes, she beheld therein the triumph of her schemes. She embraced the young maiden, lavishing caresses upon her: and then she issued from the chamber, with the intimation that she must rejoin Sir John for another half-hour in the drawing-room ere she could retire to rest.

When Laura was alone, she wept for a few moments at the thought of having played the hypocrite in the presence of her sister, and in having suffered her to depart under a false impression with regard to her sentiments and views. But she soon ceased to trouble and agitate herself on this point; for naturally ingenuous and truth-loving though she were, yet she could not help feeling that whatsoever duplicity or concealment she had just been practising, was not merely venial, but even justifiable under existing circumstances. Hastily wiping away her tears, she sate down to pen her letter to Edgar Beverley.

In the meantime Mrs. Oxenden had returned to the drawing-room, where the Baronet was half reclining upon a sofa, sipping a glass of choice liqueur. Mrs. Oxenden placed herself in a chair near him; and with triumph upon her countenance,

she said, "Laura has yielded finally and completely, as I all along assured you that she would."

"Then the marriage may be celebrated by the priest to-morrow?" exclaimed Sir John, in a tone of hasty inquiry; "and we can set off immediately afterwards to have the Protestant ceremony performed by special license in London, according to our original plan?"

"I fear that it cannot be so," answered Mrs. Oxenden: "for you know that the priest had scruples in pronouncing the nuptial blessing unless Laura gave her fullest and completest assent. This she has only just done: she will require to-morrow to think well over it—for I am as intimately acquainted with her disposition as it is possible to be. But the day after——"

"Ah, I understand you!" growled Sir John surlily. "You are a woman of the world—and you will have all the settlements signed and sealed before you give me your sister. Do you think I shall fly from my word? do you suppose I am not sincere in disinheriting a younker for whom I have no more love nor affection than for the veriest stranger—but whom on the contrary I am inclined to hate because he shows his father's independent spirit? or do you think that I shall fly away from the bargain which is to make over ten thousand pounds to you as the price for your charming sister?"

"I wish you would not use such coarse blunt language, Sir John," observed Mrs. Oxenden, as a flush appeared upon her handsome countenance.

"Coarse language, indeed!" he ejaculated: and then he gave a still coarser laugh. "Why, look you, my dear friend!—let us not shut our eyes to the true nature of the transaction—because when we have to deliberate over it, it is inconvenient to blink the truth and go beating about the bush. Besides, you and I have known each other long enough and well enough to have no disguise between us——"

"Well, my dear Sir John," said Mrs. Oxenden deeming it expedient to cajole and conciliate the old man as much as possible; "have it entirely your own way—and put the matter in whatsoever light you may think fit."

"All I want is this," continued the Baronet,—"that you shall not flatter yourself I am your dupe, or that you have caught me as a veritable dotard in your meshes."

"Good heavens, Sir John!" exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, frightened lest things were about to take a turn but little in accordance with her hopes and views; "how *can* you think of talking in a strain so ungenerous—so unkind——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Baronet, who was really under the influence of this deep designing woman, but who wished to persuade himself that it was otherwise and that he was altogether independent in his own mode of action,—"we will not get to angry words: but now that affairs are growing towards a termination, it is just as well for us to understand each other. Look you—how rests the matter? I receive communications from Brighton, from my nephew and yourself, to the effect that he has fallen desperately in love with your sister Laura. I at once send off for you to come to me and receive personal explanations; because I think they are due to you after all that in previous years had taken place betwixt you and me. You come accordingly—and I then tell you in confidence that I mean to disinherit my nephew, as I possess the power to do so—and that I mean to marry in the hope of having an heir. Then you draw me such a picture of your beautiful sister that you make the blood thrill in my veins——"

"But why this recapitulation," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, "of all that is so well known to us both?"

"Because I am resolved," returned Sir John, somewhat gruffly, "that the matter shall be established clearly between us in all its details. Well, as I was saying, you straightway drew me such a picture of your sister that I was quite ravished by it—and fancied myself altogether young again. Patience!—do not interrupt me. I told you at the time that if the original proved only half as charming as the portraiture, I would gladly make her Lady Steward. Now, I do not hesitate to confess that skilful as you are in the art of word-painting, and vivid as your verbal delineation was of Laura's charms, you adhered strictly to the truth—you did not exaggerate——"

"Well, I am glad to hear that my promises and your hopes were completely fulfilled," interjected Mrs. Oxenden.

"Oh, yes!" ejaculated Sir John: "I freely admit that such was the case. But in another sense you deceived me somewhat."

"Deceived you?" ejaculated Mrs. Oxenden.

"Yes," rejoined the Baronet: "but yet I do not think you did it wilfully. I fancied from what you said that I should find her less coy—or at all events more susceptible of kind assiduities and attentions——"

"You could scarcely expect, Sir John," observed Mrs. Oxenden, "that a young maiden on being introduced to you for the first time——"

"Yes, my dear friend," interposed the Baronet: "but during your journey from Brighton to Ramsgate, you broke your mind to her—you told her that she must banish Edgar Beverley from her recollection—and that she must prepare herself to look upon me as her future husband."

"All this I did, Sir John, as you are well aware," answered Mrs. Oxenden impressively; "and though not remarkable for any peculiar nicety of feelings, I can assure you it was a task which I should by no means like to have to execute over again."

"Well, well, I give you credit for all good intentions," remarked Sir John: "but still you must allow that my first meeting with your sister was but little flattering to me. First she looked at me in a sort of wild bewilderment as if she had not rightly comprehended whom I was: and then, when you formally mentioned my name, she positively gave a shriek——"

"But you should make allowances, Sir John, for the circumstances which attended our arrival. The breaking down of the postchaise—and then you will admit too that your costume was not precisely that which becomes you best."

"It is the one though that I *like* the best!" answered the Baronet: "it leaves me comfortable and easy:"—and he stretched himself out upon the sofa; for he was still attired in the very same

manner as that to which reference had been just made. "Well," he continued, "we will put aside the circumstances of our first meeting: but do you not recollect what trouble you had to get the girl down into the garden to say a few words to me yesterday morning—and how all my cajoleries, and protestations, and representations appeared either to frighten her or else to be thrown away upon her?"

"But what is the use of recapitulating all these things," inquired Mrs. Oxenden impatiently, "since the final consent has just been given?"

"Ah! my recommendation that the old negress should be placed in attendance upon her, doubtless went for something," observed Sir John, with a complacent air: "it was a sort of terrorism which mingled usefully with your arguments and with my attentions: so, you perceive, there was a blending of influences under which the sweet girl could not help yielding. Well, as you say, the final consent is given—and I am satisfied. But now we come to the point. I want you to understand that I have done all this with my eyes open, and that I have not been led into it by any intrigues or designs on your part. I wanted a wife—and you have found me one. It has saved me a world of trouble in respect to courtship;—and besides, I might have travelled all over England without finding a young creature so completely to my taste. Then, as to the bargain which was settled between us, it was clear and specific enough, and shall be faithfully kept. You are to receive ten thousand pounds as a sort of acknowledgment for having conducted the affair with delicacy and success: I am to settle three thousand a-year upon your sister;—and all these things shall be done. I have moreover promised to make my will in her favour so far as the residue of my property is concerned: and that likewise will I do. My attorney will be here by the first train the day after to-morrow. That will be at noon—and everything shall be at once settled. But again I tell you that you must not run away with the idea you are dealing with an old dotard——"

"For shame, Sir John, to impute such a thing to me—or to pay so ill a compliment to your own self!"—and there was a most artfully devised commingling of apparent vexation and complimentary cajolery in Mrs. Oxenden's look and manner as well as in her words.

"Now, are you sure," asked the Baronet, "that Edgar Beverley could not possibly get upon your track when you left Brighton?"

"Totally impossible!" answered Mrs. Oxenden: "the precautions which I took were so well arranged. But why did you ask the question? what fear can you entertain concerning him? You have it in your power to disinherit him: he cannot therefore assume a menacing or dictatorial attitude—and he is moreover at your mercy for the allowance you give him, and which, with quite enough generosity, you are about to convert into a permanent annuity."

"True, true," said the old Baronet. "I don't know what reason I should have to stand in any fear of that self-sufficient jackanapes: nevertheless, love between young people sometimes leads to strange unforeseen incidents—and we do know there is a proverb which says that it laughs at locksmiths."

"Trust me, Sir John, for the safe keeping of my sister Laura. What with the negress in one room and myself in another, she could not possibly escape at night; and as for the daytime—— But really it is altogether unnecessary to give you these assurances: for Laura has been overcome by my arguments—her assent is final—and I know her well enough to be aware that when once she makes up her mind to a particular course, and that course is dictated by me, she will not seek to retract nor to deviate from it. By the bye, how simple a thing it was which gave the first turn in our favour. Trivial and even stupid as the idea might have seemed at the time, it is not the less a fact that the performance of those mountebanks whom you were going to send to prison, cheered her spirits and produced that revulsion which has progressed during the remainder of the day, and has this evening rendered her completely docile and pliant."

"Well," observed the Baronet, "we must keep her amused to-morrow: but she must not be suffered to set foot outside the premises, except in the garden at the back of the house——"

"Leave everything to me," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden. "You see that Laura's mind is so artless and innocent, it is the least thing childish—or at all events girlish—and she is amused by a trifle. Only think, Sir John, of what an amiable unsophisticated young creature you are about to have as a wife! But as for the amusements of to-morrow, I took care to tell those itinerant jugglers to come again; and I will make them stop as long as Laura appears to be diverted with them."

The conversation between this most delectable couple was carried on for a little while longer; and then they separated to their respective chambers,—Mrs. Oxenden to reflect with secret triumph on those schemes which were to give her immediate possession of ten thousand pounds, and the prospective control of her sister's wealth at the old Baronet's death,—and the old Baronet himself to gloat over the idea of soon folding in his arms the loveliest being on whom his eyes had ever yet settled.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

EDGAR AND CHRISTIAN.

It was about two o'clock on the following day, and Edgar Beverley was pacing to and fro in his apartment at the Royal Hotel in an agitated and anxious manner. Christian was seated at the table; and every now and then he enjoined his friend to be composed, for that everything would be sure to go right.

"It is two o'clock," said Beverley, consulting his watch; "and our friend the mountebank ought to be back by this time."

"How can we tell in what manner he may be delayed?" asked our hero.

"But what if Laura should not have an opportunity of slipping the note into his hand?" exclaimed the lieutenant, who was conjuring up all kinds of misadventures—and, in ordinary parlance, was actually meeting them half way,—a weakness which is common and yet natural enough on the part of those who love.

But before Christian had time to give him an answer, the door opened; and the friendly mountebank made his appearance. Edgar surveyed him with the intensest anxiety: but it only lasted for a few instants,—inasmuch as the man drew forth a billet which he presented to the lieutenant.

"Heaven be thanked!" ejaculated Beverley: and recognizing the handwriting, he pressed the letter to his lips.

"You had better withdraw now," said Christian to the mountebank: "but come back presently in case there be aught else wherein your services may be rendered available."

The juggler retired; and in the meanwhile Edgar Beverley had torn open the precious billet and was deeply absorbed in its contents. Christian glanced at him for a moment, to assure himself that all was right; and the look which he thus flung, led to a satisfactory conclusion, inasmuch as his friend's countenance was radiant with joy.

"Yes, my dear Ashton," exclaimed Beverley, grasping our hero's hand when the perusal of the letter was finished; "the hopes you have held out will be realized. Here! read for yourself."

"No," responded Christian: "a communication of that kind is sacred."

"But, my dear friend," rejoined Edgar quickly, "I have no secrets from you! Besides, should I not be wanting in a proper confidence—would it not be unkind—ungenerous——"

"Lovers," interposed Christian, "write to each other in that fond endearing strain which constitutes the sanctity as well as the charm of their correspondence. I can assure you that I have a delicacy in reading the letter: pray sit down and tell me all that it is necessary for me to know for the furtherance of the plans in which I am so heartily and so gladly succouring you."

"You shall have your own way," answered Beverley. "But perhaps you will be surprised that I am thus happy and joyous when I tell you that this very note,—which gives me the assurance of my Laura's unwavering love, and of her readiness to be rescued by me from an odious captivity,—likewise acquaints me with the fact that I am naught but a poor lieutenant who henceforth must look upon himself as having nothing but his pay."

"I can of course understand," said Christian, "that if you run away with Miss Hall—whom, by the bye, you denominated Neville in your history——"

"Because her name is Laura Neville Hall," remarked Edgar.

"I was about to say," resumed Christian, "that I can well understand how your uncle will at once stop your allowance: but he cannot alienate from you your rightful heritage if he should die without lawful male issue."

"Yes—but he *has* that power!" answered Beverley: "this note conveys to me the fact. Some old document, which a lawyer has just disinterred from amidst dusty mouldering papers, establishes the right of breaking off the entail. What care I for that? Laura will be mine—and if we be poor in one sense, we shall be rich in the wealth of our heart's love. Oh, yes, my dear Ashton! I am supremely happy—I am full of hope and confidence—we will scatter all difficulties to the winds—and never, never will you have served a more grateful friend than I shall prove myself to you!"

"I know it," answered Christian. "And now tell me, what course are we next to pursue?"

"It is as we suspected," resumed Beverley: "my villanous uncle seeks to make Laura his bride; and her vile sister——alas! that I should be thus compelled to speak of my beloved's nearest relative!——is the chief agent in carrying out the hoped-for sacrifice of youth and innocence to old age and iniquity. But by some means Laura has succeeded in lulling them into security; and by a wrong interpretation of certain words she has uttered, they flatter themselves that she has given her consent. Not however that their vigilance is relaxed: on the contrary——"

"We will baffle them, however watchful they may be!" exclaimed Christian. "Pray proceed."

"It appears that Laura sleeps in a chamber situated between two others," continued Beverley. "The first—which opens from the landing—is occupied by her sister Mrs. Oxenden: then comes her own: and beyond that is a dressing-room in which a bed has been made up for the accommodation of a horrible negress whose influence has been used to coerce and intimidate the poor girl."

"But is there a window to Miss Hall's apartment?" inquired Christian hastily: "I mean, is there a window looking upon the front or back of the house?"

"It looks upon the front," answered Beverley; "and she has so accurately described it in her letter, that we cannot possibly mistake it. She moreover tells me that it will not be difficult for her to retire to her chamber at about half-past nine o'clock this evening: the negress will not seek the dressing-room until ten; and Mrs. Oxenden will not repair to her own chamber until half-an-hour later. Whatever, therefore, is to be done, must be accomplished between half-past nine and ten o'clock."

"There are thirty good minutes," exclaimed Christian; "and almost as many seconds would be sufficient for our purpose. We will enlist the services of the friendly mountebank—we will have a postchaise-and-four in waiting—and if success do not crown our enterprise, I shall never have been more mistaken in all my life."

Our hero and the lieutenant continued to deliberate upon the details of their plan until the friendly juggler returned to the hotel. He received his instructions, together with a liberal reward for the faithful execution of his mission of that day; and the man took his departure infinitely delighted with the lucrative employment which he had thus temporarily found.

In the same way that love at one time feeds itself with the wildest hopes, so at another does it torture itself with a thousand anxieties. Yet, paradoxical though the phrases may seem, love's hopes are ever interwoven with mistrust, and its apprehensions are permeated with beams of hopefulness. Love hopes on in the face of despair itself; and it sometimes despairs when it ought to hope. It is a passion which in its association

with other sentiments is made up of contradictions: but as the river receives all confluent streamlets and absorbs those varied and insignificant waters in its own rolling volume—so does the tide of love's passion flow onward and onward, amalgamating in one flood the different feelings and discrepant emotions which become its undercurrents, and with their conflicting elements serve to swell and give a forward impetus to the whole. And then, too, this river which we are metaphorically taking as an illustration of love's progress, pursues its course at one time amidst dark frowning rocks, blackening its surface with their shadows, and shutting out the sun of hope: but at another time it meanders through smiling meads, where its banks are garlanded with flowers, and where its transparent waters shine brilliantly, with the sunbeams playing upon its bosom and kissing all its gentle ripples. For well has the poet said that "the course of true love never did run smooth;" and if we take the passion from its first inception in the human breast—trace its progress—and study its track, until it at length bears Hymen's bark exultingly upon its bosom—we shall find that there is no more appropriate similitude than that which is furnished by the course of some of earth's proudest rivers. For is not love at first like a little silver stream in the profundities of a wilderness—always flowing and swelling onward, though not always seen—then widening and deepening—now diverted from its course by some obstacle, now dammed up until the weight of its waters break down the impediment—thus sometimes free and sometimes checked, though never altogether subdued, until its channel becomes broad and deep and its waters expand into a glorious flood. Oh! wherefore have novelists and poets ever taken love as their most favourite theme? why has the minstrel made it the subject of his harmony, and the limner illustrated its episodes upon his canvass? Is it not because it is the most important passion which the human heart can possibly know—a source alike of the sublimest happiness and the profoundest misery—sometimes a blessing, at others a curse—and often proving the pivot upon which turn the mightiest deeds as well as the gravest occurrences ever beholden upon the theatre of the world? What reader, therefore, will ever quarrel with his author if for a space he digress to discourse upon the varied elements which form the compound of love, or to expatiate upon the immensity of its influence over the hearts as well as the transactions of human beings?

But we set out by observing that if love at one time feed itself upon the purest manna of hope—so at another does it voluntarily distil drops of bitterness into the cup which it drinks. Nor was the love of Edgar Beverley an exception to this rule. At first Laura's letter had inspired him with enthusiastic hope: but subsequently—during the hours which elapsed ere it was time to enter upon the execution of the settled plan—the young lieutenant gave way to a thousand torturing fears. Christian did all he could to soothe and tranquillize his friend, and to make him revert to the belief that everything would go right: but Christian himself, if similarly situated at the moment in respect to Isabella, would have been harrassed by precisely the same apprehensions. We will not therefore unnecessarily extend this portion of our narrative: but without further preface we will proceed to a description of the scenes which occurred in the evening of that memorable day.

At about twenty minutes past nine o'clock, a postchaise-and-four advanced at a slow pace into the neighbourhood of Verner House—the postilions thus gently walking their horses in order as much as possible to avoid the chance of the sounds of the equipage being heard within the walls of the habitation. The chaise contained three persons—Edgar Beverley, Christian Ashton, and the friendly mountebank—this last-mentioned individual being, as a matter of course, attired in his plain clothes. The equipage halted at a distance of barely a hundred yards from the house,—it being deemed expedient to have it thus close to the scene of action in case of the principal actors themselves being pressed hard by pursuit. Moreover, the spot chosen for the halting-place of the vehicle, was completely embowered by the trees skirting both sides of the road, and the boughs of which interlacingly joined overhead. Beverley, Ashton, and the mountebank alighted from the chaise; the postilions, already well instructed, and likewise liberally remunerated, retained their seats upon their horses; and the three individuals advanced cautiously, like a reconnoitring party, towards the house. They however soon stopped by the side of a thick hedge; and thence they drew forth a ladder which the mountebank and one of his companions had procured and concealed there in the course of the evening, according to the instructions given by the lieutenant and Christian. But scarcely had they thus possessed themselves of this necessary implement for the scaling of the fortress, —when, through the deep gloom of the evening, a female form was all in an instant descried advancing rapidly towards them. The woman had just passed by the equipage: she had therefore seen it —she was proceeding in the same direction as themselves—and if she belonged to Verner House, she would of course give the alarm. All this struck Edgar and his coadjutors in a moment: but just as the lieutenant was about to whisper some rapid words of consultation, our young hero's lips sent forth an ejaculation of "The negress!"

At the same moment he sprang forward and caught her by the arm. He had recognised her at once; her hideous countenance, as well as her apparel, pointed her out as the same whom he had seen in the garden, and to whom Laura Hall had specially alluded in her letter to Edgar Beverley. The woman, on being thus seized upon, gave vent to a shriek of terror: but Christian, vehemently bidding her remain silent, assured her that she had nothing to fear if she held her peace. She was much alarmed, and tremblingly besought that no mischief might be done her.

"Be silent," reiterated Christian, "and you have no ground for apprehension. Proceed! proceed!" he instantaneously added, thus addressing himself to Beverley: "you must leave me to take charge of this woman until——"

But having spoken this last word significantly, he stopped suddenly short; and Beverley hastened away with the mountebank,—the last-mentioned individual carrying the ladder over his shoulder. Christian had seen at a single mental glance that as it was absolutely necessary to keep the negress

there as a prisoner until Laura's flight should be ensured, he himself was the most proper person to hold her in such custody. Edgar Beverley's presence in the rescue of his beloved was of course absolutely necessary; and Christian felt that the mountebank might not possibly be quite so firm or strenuous as he himself would be in holding the negress fast.

"She may hold out promises of heavier bribes from Sir John than Edgar can give," thought our hero to himself; "and the juggler might be tempted. The guardianship of this woman for the present shall consequently be my own care."

So soon as Beverley and the mountebank had hastened away from the spot, Christian said to the negress, "I have already assured you that no harm will befall you if you remain silent and motionless on the spot where you now stand. But I charge you not to trust too much to my forbearance: for I should be little inclined to stand upon punctilious terms with one who has been instrumental in keeping an innocent young lady in an odious captivity."

The horrible black woman was completely overawed by Christian's words and manner, which he purposely rendered fierce and threatening: and she continued quiet.

In the meantime Edgar Beverley and the mountebank had advanced towards the mansion; and the former had no difficulty in at once discovering which was the chamber occupied by his beloved Laura. Indeed, at the very moment that he and his assistant arrived in front of the dwelling, a light appeared in that particular room. Edgar's heart beat quickly: his ear could catch its pulsations as he and the mountebank paused in front of Verner House to assure themselves that no one else was lurking about outside. The night was very dark, but perfectly mild; and no suspicious sound reached them—nor could their eyes, straining to penetrate through the obscurity, discern any human form moving about. The ladder was accordingly planted against the window of Laura's chamber: and Edgar, rapidly ascending it, tapped gently at the glass. The few moments which followed ere the summons was answered, were full of acutest suspense for the lieutenant,—inasmuch as he could not see into the room, the heavy draperies being drawn completely over the casement, and it might not be Laura who was there—or if it were, it was by no means certain that she was alone. Her sister or a maid-servant might happen to be with her—although her note to her lover had given rise to a hope in altogether a contrary sense.

The suspense of Edgar Beverley was not however of long duration: the draperies parted in the centre—and the well-beloved Laura appeared to his view. Oh, with what ecstacy beat his heart! what joy thrilled through his form! The light of the wax-candles inside the chamber beamed upon his countenance; and a kindred animation of wild delight irradiated the young maiden's features as she recognised him who was dearer to her than any being in the world beside. Nevertheless, caution was not lost sight of—the window was opened gently—and then Laura's fair hand was pressed to Edgar's lips.

"Come, dearest—come!" he said in a low but fervid whisper: "the chaise is waiting—there must not be an instant's delay!"

"Dearest Edgar!" murmured the damsel, her joy being so excessive that her emotions now found vent in tears. "You know not how much I have suffered ——But never, never, Edgar," she added more firmly, and likewise with a sudden access of solemnity,—"never, never will I forget all this goodness on your part!"

She pressed his hand, and flew to put on her bonnet and shawl: but her heart fluttered and her hand trembled so that she felt as if she had incurred the danger of being as much overpowered by joy as but a short time back she stood the chance of being overwhelmed with affliction. At length however, after the lapse of some moments —which seemed ages to the impatient lover—she was ready attired; and she rejoined him at the window. Still so timid and nervous was she, however, that he perceived at a glance she would not be able to descend the ladder without the most careful assistance; and vaulting over the window-sill, he sprang into the room, that he might help her out first, and thus be enabled to hold her hand as she descended the ladder. But at that very instant the sound of a door opening in the first room of the suite, reached the ears of the lovers; and Laura, suddenly becoming pale as death, faintly ejaculated, "My sister!"

Not for a single instant did Edgar Beverley lose his presence of mind: on the contrary, it all in a moment received the most vivid impulse; and with one spring across the room, he reached the door of communication between the two chambers. The handle of that door was already turning in the grasp of Mrs. Oxenden,—when the key itself was turned by Edgar Beverley; and the next instant he was by Laura's side again.

"Open the door, Laura!" exclaimed the voice of Mrs. Oxenden from the opposite side of the secured portal: "open the door directly, I command you!"

"Energy, dearest Laura—energy and courage, for God's sake!" whispered Beverley. "The least hesitation—and everything is lost!"

But as Mrs. Oxenden's voice continued to peal from the opposite side of the door, the poor damsel was almost overwhelmed with affright; in such dread did she stand of her sister, that she could not possibly conquer her terrors. Nevertheless, by some little exertion on her own part, but more through the assistance of her lover, she passed over the window-sill and got upon the ladder,—at the same time that the voice of Mrs. Oxenden suddenly ceased to be heard from the opposite side of the door: though the excitement experienced by both the lovers prevented them from hearing the sounds of the unprincipled woman's rapidly retreating footsteps.

The crisis was now a serious one—for though Beverley was determined to defend Laura with his very life, if necessary, yet he likewise knew that his uncle had a numerous retinue of male dependants, and that he would not scruple to urge them to any deed of violence. However, by the joint assistance of her lover and the mountebank, Laura descended the ladder, and reached the ground in safety. Then away towards the post-chaise! But all in an instant the front door of the mansion opened—Sir John Steward and Mrs. Oxenden rushed out first—a troop of men-servants followed next; and from a side-door three or four

other male dependants rushed out, darting towards the road, and thus cutting off the progress of the fugitives. Beverley had caught up Laura in his arms, and was hasteuing with all his speed towards the post-chaise,—when he was seized upon by some of the old Baronet's myrmidons. Laura fainted. To have loosened his hold upon her, would have been to drop her upon the ground: but to retain her was to render himself powerless for defence. Supporting her, therefore, as well as he could on his left arm, he dealt such vigorous blows with his right as speedily to shake off his two foremost assailants: the mountebank ably assisted him; and the next instant Christian, whose ears had caught the disturbance, arrived upon the spot. Our young hero and the mountebank did all they possibly could to clear the way for Edgar's passage towards the post-chaise: they valorously sought to bring all the brunt of the conflict upon themselves: but a violent blow with a stout stick grasped by a sturdy footman, levelled Christian with the ground—the mountebank, perceiving that all was over, took to his heels and fled precipitately—Beverley and Laura were made prisoners.

"Bring them all into the house!" vociferated Sir John; "and as a magistrate will I deal with these ruffians. Mrs. Oxenden, take charge of your sister!"

These mandates were obeyed: the still insensible Laura was borne by Mrs. Oxenden and the negress (who in the meanwhile had come upon the spot) into the mansion—whither Edgar and Christian were likewise forcibly conducted.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE LAWYER.

Our young hero had been stunned for a few moments by the severe blow he received: but he quickly recovered his consciousness, to find himself in the power of half-a-dozen stalwart and determined fellows—while a glance showed him that such was likewise the fate of his friend Beverley. The enterprise had therefore completely failed; and the aspect of affairs was even worse than before the adventure was undertaken. Beverley maintained a dignified silence,—he being determined to wait and see what course his uncle would have the hardihood to adopt: yet inwardly his feelings were those of the acutest disappointment and grief. As for Christian,—he likewise held his peace for the present; and his own sorrow at the failure of the enterprise was scarcely less poignant than that of his friend Beverley.

Sir John Steward, with a fierce triumph depicted upon his countenance, led the way into the dining-room, where he seated himself at the head of the table. Edgar and Christian were in the grasp of some seven or eight lacqueys and grooms; and they were of course powerless against the numerical strength of the enemy. Mrs. Oxenden was temporarily absent in charge of her sister.

"Now I intend," said Sir John Steward, "to investigate this matter magisterially, and without the slightest reference to my relationship with one of the prisoners——But surely," he ejaculated, thus suddenly interrupting himself, "I have seen you before?"—and he fixed his eyes upon Christian.

"Yes," responded our hero, in a firm voice; "we met on the occasion when your intended victim was first brought by her infamous sister to your house."

"You impertinent young scoundrel!" exclaimed Sir John Steward, half springing from his seat in a furious rage; "how dare you make use of such terms as these?"

"This young gentleman," said Beverley, alluding to Christian, "is a friend of mine: and on his behalf I hurl back the term *scoundrel* in your teeth."

"Oh, oh! a pretty set of fellows we have got to deal with!" said Sir John Steward.

Here Mrs. Oxenden suddenly made her appearance; and as her eyes fell upon Christian Ashton, she instantaneously recognized him.

"I always suspected, sir," she said, with a fierce flashing of her dark eyes, and a scornful drawing-up of her fine person, "that you were some insolent meddler in affairs which did not concern you."

"To succour an innocent and virtuous young lady," responded our hero haughtily, "is a paramount duty on the part of even the veriest stranger. That duty I took upon myself; and if I have failed in the attempt, my own conscience will enable me to endure with pride and satisfaction any reproaches which *your* lips, madam, may fling out against me, or any punishment which Sir John Steward in his capacity as a magistrate may be enabled to inflict."

"Nobly spoken, my gallant young friend!" exclaimed Edgar Beverley; "and rest assured that though the cause of right and justice, truth and virtue, may suffer defeat,—yet that chastisement will sooner or later overtake the triumphant wrong-doers. Sir John Steward, I tell you to your face——"

"Silence, sir!" vociferated the Baronet. "Hold them fast, my worthy fellows—and we will presently see how these two moral-preaching upstarts will relish a condemnation to the county gaol. For here is downright burglary—violence—assault and battery—abduction——I don't know but that it amounts to—to——"

And the Baronet stopped short for want of some term to express a more heinous crime than any he had yet specified.

"This young man," said Mrs. Oxenden, intimating our hero, "forcibly stopped the negress and retained her for several minutes a prisoner in the road, close by the spot where a postchaise was in waiting."

"Coercion and intimidation!" vociferated Sir John; "almost highway robbery! I must make out the committal of these misdemeanants for six weeks as rogues and vagabonds——"

"Sir John Steward," interrupted Edgar Beverley, with a haughty indignation, "remember that I am an officer in the Queen's service——"

"And therefore," retorted the Baronet, "all the more completely bound to maintain law and order."

"You are determined to compel me to speak out," resumed Beverley, in the same haughtily indignant tone as before, and with corresponding looks. "Sir John Steward——"

"Silence!" again vociferated the old Baronet, waving his hand furiously. "I do not treat you as a nephew——I discard you—I disown you!"

"You were already prepared to do so," replied Edgar, drawing his tall form up proudly in the midst of his custodians, "before the incidents of this evening. Rest assured that I should feel myself but little flattered or complimented by being spoken of in the world as the relative of such as you! And now, Sir John Steward, you *shall* hear me. You may exercise your power tyrannously over my liberty: but you cannot place a gag between my lips. I accuse you of keeping a young lady within these walls against her will—I accuse you of contemplating the coercion of this young lady into a marriage which is loathsome and repugnant to her—I accuse you of leaguing and conniving with an infamous woman——"

"Sir John Steward," cried Mrs. Oxenden, her countenance livid with rage, "is this abominable language to be tolerated?"

"It is shocking," interjected Beverley, "that a man should be compelled to speak thus of a woman: but with *you*, Mrs. Oxenden, I consider myself bound to keep no terms and to be swayed by no fastidiousness. Let your friend Sir John Steward *dare* to pronounce a sentence of imprisonment against me and my generous-hearted companion, and I will unreservedly proclaim——"

But at this moment there was a loud knocking at the street-door,—which had been immediately preceded by the sounds of an equipage rolling up to the front of the mansion, although these sounds had passed unheard in the dining-room on account of the excitement of the scene.

"Who can this be?" ejaculated Sir John. "The present business must be suspended for a moment——I may be wanted——it is possible that it is some one for me. Keep the prisoners in secure custody——And I would advise *you*, Edgar, to retain a still tongue in your head if you wish me to show you any mercy."

Beverley flung a scornful look upon his uncle—but he made no verbal remark: he felt that he ought to do as much as he possibly could to procure the release of the young friend whose generous services on his behalf had involved him in the present dilemma. Sir John Steward issued from the room, accompanied by Mrs. Oxenden: Edgar and Christian remaining in the custody of the domestics.

As the Baronet and his female accomplice passed forth into the hall, a footman was just opening the front door and giving admittance to a middle-aged gentleman, from the side-pocket of whose overcoat peeped forth some parchments and other deeds. This was Mr. Andrews, the London attorney, whose arrival was not expected until the morrow. He was an active bustling individual—talked with great volubility—and though really of good manners, was nevertheless inclined to be somewhat too servilely obsequious towards his wealthy clients. He was not exactly an unprincipled person—he would not of his own accord perform a dishonest action: but he was what might be termed a sharp practitioner,—doing everything that the law allowed for the side that he espoused, and believing that it was perfectly consistent with the character of an honourable man to avail himself of whatsoever quirks and chicaneries might be evolved during the course of his professional proceedings.

Such was the attorney who now received a hearty welcome from Sir John Steward; and in a few rapidly uttered words Mr. Andrews explained how it was that he had come on the eve of the day when he was expected to arrive. The deeds were all finished—he found that there was a late train—and he thought that he might just as well run down from London at once, instead of waiting until the morrow, as he saw by the tenour of Sir John Steward's letters that he was anxious to get the business settled as soon as possible. Mr. Andrews was duly complimented by the Baronet for the zeal which he had thus displayed; and as he had come to take up his temporary quarters at Verner House, the vehicle which he had hired to bring him from the railway-station was at once dismissed. Having been introduced to Mrs. Oxenden, the lawyer was conducted to the drawing-room,—where the Baronet hastily explained to him the position of affairs in respect to Edgar Beverley and Christian. Mrs. Oxenden temporarily quitted the room in order to revisit her sister; and when the door closed behind her, the lawyer drew his chair nearer to that occupied by the Baronet,—at the same time observing, "This is a nasty business, Sir John—a very nasty business; and you must manage it with great delicacy. Pray excuse me: but——"

"What do you mean?" inquired the Baronet. "Is it all right about the deed breaking off the entail and thereby disinheriting my graceless nephew?"

"All right, my dear sir," responded the lawyer, with a smile half obsequious, half professionally significant. "It is amongst these papers here:"—and he pointed to the documents which lay before him upon the table.

"Then let me sign it at once!" exclaimed the old Baronet, in his greedy haste thus to avenge himself upon the nephew whom he detested.

"Softly—softly, Sir John!" said the lawyer. "With all due deference, the matter cannot be settled in such a railway speed. I am bound to read the document over to you——"

"Nonsense! nonsense!" ejaculated the Baronet "We can dispense with all formalities——"

"But, my dear Sir John," again interposed the attorney—and it was with another obsequious smile,—"the document must be attested by competent witnesses. Now, pray listen to me. Here are all the deeds—marriage-settlements, draft of will, and everything that you have ordered: but *do* let them stand over until we have first discussed the affair which seems to press with the most importance."

"Well, well," said the Baronet, "no doubt you are right—and after all, something must be done at once in respect to this scapegrace of a nephew of mine and his friend."

"Pardon me for appearing to dictate, my dear Sir John," resumed Mr. Andrews; "but you really must not treat the matter magisterially. It would perhaps be all the better for me," he went on to observe with a chuckle; "because you would be certain to have actions for false imprisonment brought against you——"

"And what do I care?" exclaimed the Baronet. "I have the means of paying the damages."

"True, my dear sir," rejoined the lawyer: "but you have not the means of preventing the scandal. Excuse me—but, as you are aware, —though I never saw the lady until this evening —it is no secret to me that Mrs. Oxenden was your mistress some years ago: doubtless Mr. Beverley is equally sensible of this fact—and you know, my dear Sir John, it would not be pleasant if the world came to know that you had married the sister of your former paramour. Come, do be reasonable! You are a man of sound sense—of great intelligence—though a trifle hasty perhaps——and it would be well to treat this matter with prudence and policy."

"What course do you recommend?" asked the Baronet. "In plain terms, all I want to do is to keep this nephew of mine fast until after the marriage knot is tied: for between you and me, Andrews, I don't mind admitting that if I set him free to-night—and though it is settled that the beautiful Laura is to be mine before to-morrow's noon—yet in the meanwhile——"

"I understand, Sir John," interjected the lawyer: "your nephew is so desperately enamoured of the young lady that he would even set fire to the very house with the chance of being enabled to carry her off in the scramble. Well, well—but there is still a means of settling the affair amicably. What should you say to allowing your nephew five hundred a-year, if he would sign a paper renouncing all pretension to the hand of Miss Hall—and if he would immediately afterwards take himself off to join his regiment at Brighton? You were going to make the two-hundred a-year a permanent settlement: it is only flinging in three hundred more——and what is that to a man of wealth such as you are?"

"But of what earthly use," inquired the

Baronet petulantly, "is a document of the nature you mention? He may sign it as a stratagem to procure his freedom;—and the stupid adage is, you know, that all stratagems are allowable in love as well as in war."

"This is the use," rejoined Mr. Andrews:—"that you can display the document to Miss Hall—she will at once perceive that Mr. Beverley's worldly interests ride paramount over his love—and the natural pride of woman will induce her to discard him from her heart for ever."

"On my soul, this is capital!" ejaculated Sir John Steward, clutching at the idea the moment that it was fully expounded to him. "Why, my dear Andrews, you are as well versed in love-affairs as you are in those of the law. But what course do you mean to adopt?"

"Will you be guided by me, Sir John?" asked the attorney.

"To be sure! to be sure! You are managing matters so well——"

"Then let us have Mr. Beverley up here at once. He must be alone with us—the servants can wait outside the drawing-room door—and I dare say the windows are high enough to prevent an escape. Shall I ring the bell?"

Sir John Steward nodded an assent: the bell was rung—a servant answered the summons—the order was given—and in a couple of minutes Edgar Beverley was introduced to the drawing-room. The Baronet strove to render the expression of his countenance as sternly grave as possible, as he bade the domestics retire but wait on the landing outside: Edgar advanced into the room with a dignified demeanour, and took a seat some distance from the table.

"This gentleman," said Sir John Steward, "is Mr. Andrews, my solicitor—and he is desirous of having some little conversation with you."

"Then, as a gentleman versed in the law," at once observed Edgar, addressing himself to the attorney, "you will perhaps inform Sir John Steward that it may be dangerous to keep my friend Mr. Ashton any longer in the custody of a set of lacqueys: for what he has helped me to do—or rather to attempt—here this evening, can be justified by every principle of rectitude and honour."

"There will be no harm, Mr. Beverley," replied the solicitor, "in your friend remaining a few minutes longer in his present position, inasmuch as I hope that you will both very shortly go away together in freedom and in peace, as the result of the discourse I am about to hold with you."

"Proceed, sir," said Edgar, coldly.

"My dear sir," resumed Mr. Andrews, with a bland smile, "you cannot possibly entertain any animosity against me. If you do, I am sorry for it. But let us come to the point. This document, Mr. Beverley"—and he lifted the deed from the table as he spoke—"will have the effect, when duly signed by Sir John Steward, of breaking off the entail of his estates and enabling him to bequeath them to whomsoever he may think fit. You must therefore understand that inasmuch as you will henceforth have no prospective interest in your uncle's property, you become entirely dependent upon his bounty. But on his behalf, I offer to secure you the sum of five hundred a year, on condition that you now at once sign a paper which I in a few minutes will draw up, to the effect that you renounce all claim and pretension to the hand of Miss Hall."

Edgar Beverley sprang up from his seat in so violent an agitation that for an instant it appeared as if he were on the point of inflicting summary chastisement upon the person of the solicitor: but the next moment restraining the extreme violence of his feelings, he darted one withering glance upon his uncle, and then addressed the attorney in the following manner:—

"Your position, sir, as the mere hireling agent for another, secures you from the effects of my resentment. But hear me reject with scorn and indignation the base—the infamous proposal you have made me! As for receiving anything from what you have termed the bounty of my uncle, I should loathe myself were I to condescend to such despicable meanness. But when that falsely called bounty is offered as the price for a love which is above all price, no words are adequate for the expression of my disgust and indignation. And now I demand that I may at once be free to depart hence—my young companion likewise——or, by heaven! there shall be lives lost ere I am again overpowered!"

"Then, by heaven," exclaimed Sir John Steward, rising up from his seat in a paroxysm of ungovernable rage, "you shall see before you leave this house that I am thoroughly in earnest in disowning and disinheriting you——aye, by deed and by will!"

With these words, the Baronet rushed to the bell, which he rang violently: and on one of the domestics on the landing hastily answering the summons, the infuriate old man ordered that the butler and another upper-servant should be desired to attend in the drawing-room. Edgar sate unmoved: for though he had just now demanded his liberty, yet it was entirely on Christian's behalf: for he himself was by no means sorry to remain a little longer in the house, in the almost desperate hope that something would yet transpire in his favour. The butler and another upper-servant speedily made their appearance; and Sir John Steward, still in a towering rage, exclaimed with passionate vehemence, "I want you to witness a deed—a deed which my lawyer will now have the kindness to read over——a deed—a deed——But go on, Mr. Andrews!" added the Baronet with an oath.

The lawyer saw that any further remonstrance would be unavailing; and though after his journey from London, he would much sooner have sate down to a good supper, and then betaken himself to bed, he was nevertheless constrained through fear of displeasing the Baronet to commence the reading of the document. The butler and his fellow-servant listened with a sort of vacant bewilderment to the technical phrases, the endless circumlocutions, and the labyrinthine language of the deed: the Baronet sate with an expression of grim gloating triumph upon his countenance: Edgar Beverley was deliberating in his own mind what plan he could possibly adopt for the rescue of Laura—and so far from listening to the language of the document which was being read, he had no other sensation with regard to it than a continuous droning sound flowing upon his ear. At length, at the expiration of about twenty minutes, Mr.

Andrews ceased; and Sir John Steward, greedily snatching up a pen, exclaimed, "Now—now I will do that which is the first step towards cutting *you*, Edgar, off for ever—and then shall follow the signature of my will! You have got that deed also, Mr. Andrews—eh?"

Scarcely had the attorney answered the question in the affirmative, when the door was burst open, and Laura rushed into the room. The poor girl was like one demented: her hair was floating all dishevelled over her shoulders—her apparel was in disorder—it was even torn in two or three places: in a word, her whole appearance indicated the desperate struggle which she had made to escape from her sister and the negress. And Mrs. Oxenden herself showed signs of her frenzied efforts to hold the persecuted girl back: for she came rushing in with her own hair all disarranged, her toilet in disorder, and with fury flashing from her large dark eyes. All was confusion in a moment: the horrible negress followed Mrs. Oxenden into the room—some of the servants, likewise, from the landing—the butler and the other domestic who had been called as witnesses, sprang up from their seats—the lawyer seemed stricken with dismay—and Sir John Steward gave vent to a terrible imprecation. But Edgar Beverley, bounding forward, received Laura in his arms.

"Save me! save me!" she wildly shrieked forth: "for heaven's sake save me!"—and as she clung in frantic terror with her arms thrown round her lover's neck, she flung frightened glances over her shoulder at her sister and the negress.

"Give her up, Mr. Beverley!" cried Mrs. Oxenden, seizing upon her sister.

"No—never, never to *you*, vile profligate wretch that you are!" thundered forth the lieutenant, snatching the maiden violently from Mrs. Oxenden's grasp;—and holding the former as it were on one side, with his upraised right arm he protected her from another attack. "Dare not to lay a finger upon her!" he cried: "for I will strike indiscriminately!——Yes, by heaven! I will strike you down, woman though you be!"

"Seize upon her! seize upon that obstinate girl!" vociferated Sir John Steward, thus addressing himself to his dependants, and stamping his feet with rage. "A hundred guineas to be divided amongst you if you do my bidding!"

"No, no!" wildly shrieked forth Laura, as there was a general rush towards the spot where she clung so tenaciously to Edgar.

"Really my dear Sir John," interposed Mr. Andrews, "I am afraid——"

"Silence, sir!" thundered the Baronet: "it is my will that rules here!"

And so it did indeed too fatally seem: for what was Beverley's strength, encumbered as he was too by the very being he sought to defend, against the overwhelming power of numbers? Besides, he was constrained to limit his resistance within certain bounds for fear of injuring the now almost fainting girl; so that in less than a couple of minutes after the order had gone forth from the infuriate Sir John's lips, the lovers were separated—Beverley was again in the grasp of the domestics—Laura in the power of her sister and the negress.

The scene in that drawing-room was now fraught with a vivid and most varied interest. There stood the lieutenant, his garments torn—his countenance pale as death—his lips white and quivering—his chest heaving and falling with rapid pantings after the violence of the struggle and in the continued excitement of his own agitated feelings. On the other side of the same extremity of the apartment was Laura in the grasp of Mrs. Oxenden and the negress: the poor girl had not absolutely swooned — but half dead with mingled distress and terror, she had sunk upon her knees, and her eyes were fixed in a sort of despairing bewilderment upon her lover. At the table Sir John Steward, with a diabolic expression of countenance, resumed the seat from which he had started; and the lawyer, bending over towards him, whispered, "For heaven's sake, do not carry all this too far!"

"Now," exclaimed the Baronet, not heeding the attorney's well-meant remonstrance, but giving free vent to his vindictive rage and his feelings of ferocious triumph, "instead of having a couple of witnesses to this document which disinherits my nephew, we will have a dozen. Look, Edgar! the pen is in my hand—the ink is in the pen—the deed is before me! At this instant you are my heir—the next moment, when my name is signed, you will have no more claim upon my property at my decease than the veriest stranger!"

"Do your worst!" ejaculated Beverley. "I call every one to witness that I care not the value of the very pen which you hold, for all the estates you possess! But it is the safety and happiness of this injured, outraged young lady——"

"Ah, but she shall become my bride in spite of you!" vociferated Sir John, who was perfectly mad with rage: "and this hand which is about to write the words that will leave you a beggar, shall hold *her's* at the nuptial ceremony!"

"Remember, Sir John," exclaimed Edgar, "that heaven at any moment can paralyze and wither the hand which is stretched forth to do injustice or mischief."

"Silence, wretch! I defy you!" vociferated the furious Baronet: and again dipping the pen deep down into the ink-stand, he was about to apply it to the foot of the disinheriting document.

But all in a moment, as he half raised himself up from his chair to lean the more conveniently over the table, he was seen to give a quick spasmodic start—the pen dropped from his hand, blotting the paper with ink—but in the twinkling of an eye the sable stains were mingled with sanguine ones: for the blood gushed forth from Sir John Steward's mouth—his head fell heavily for an instant upon the table—then his balance was lost—and he sank backward into the arm-chair. Cries of horror burst forth: the attorney and the butler hastened to his assistance—but he was past all human aid—in the madness of his fury he had broken a blood vessel—and it was a corpse that lay back in that chair!

Thus all in an instant the poor and humble lieutenant who was about to be disinherited—cast off—persecuted—and robbed of the maiden of his devoted love, became Sir Edgar Beverley and the possessor of immense wealth.

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CHAPTER LXXV.

THE YOUNG BARONET.

THE scene was a frightful one: the sudden death of Sir John Steward, following with such awful quickness upon what thus proved to be a presaging warning on his nephew's part, struck all present with a sense of heaven's retribution. Edgar himself stood aghast—motionless—statue-like, though every hand which an instant before was upon him, fell as if palsied from its fierce ruffian grasp upon his garments. Laura sprang upright as if galvanized, and stood gazing for a few moments in wild horror upon the scene: then with a sudden and half-stifled shriek, she averted her looks—covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out some object of horror—and sank almost fainting upon a chair. Mrs. Oxenden, half-stunned for nearly a minute, was transfixed to the spot,—her widely-open eyes staring upon the hideous scene as if she were in a fearful state of somnambulism: and then, suddenly startled to a sense of the change which had been wrought in the circumstances of Edgar Beverley, she turned towards her sister, murmuring, "For heaven's sake forgive me, my dearest Laura!"

But the young maiden, whose brain was in a whirl, had lost all sense of the relationship subsisting between them; and seeing in Mrs. Oxenden nothing more than a bitter enemy who a few minutes back had been mercilessly upbraiding and taunting her for her attempted flight,—the young damsel, we say, repulsed with horror the vile woman whose selfishness alone prompted a reconciliation.

Mrs. Oxenden fell back utterly discomfited; and Laura, obedient to a sudden impulse, sprang forward and was once more clasped in the arms of Edgar Beverley. This time there was no one who thought of separating the lovers: but still the young maiden clung to Edgar as if she were yet without a positive idea of safety.

The attorney saw that the new Baronet was in no condition of mind to issue such commands as were requisite under the circumstances; and he therefore undertook that duty himself.

"Remove the body of your late master—begone from the room, every one of you—let Mr. Ashton, who is a prisoner down-stairs, be immediately liberated—tell him what has occurred—and show him the way hither. As for *you*, vile wretch," he added, turning to the negress, "tramp!—and if you take yourself off from the mansion at once, there will be no harm done."

Then the lawyer's eyes settled sternly upon Mrs. Oxenden, as if he meant to issue the same imperious advice to her: but she looked as if she were about to sink down on the carpet in a fit; and Mr. Andrews left the words unspoken. The commands which he had uttered, were however promptly obeyed: the negress disappeared in affright—the corpse of the deceased Baronet was borne from the apartment—the document on which the blood gushed forth, was likewise removed—the posse of domestics withdrew—and in a few moments afterwards Christian Ashton entered the drawing-room.

"Laura, dearest Laura," exclaimed Sir Edgar Beverley, "give your hand in welcome to this, my best and dearest friend—the being whom next to yourself I must love the most sincerely! You have yet to learn the immensity of obligation which is due from us both to Mr. Ashton!"

The young maiden—who by this time had recovered a sufficiency of her self-possession, if not of positive mental composure, to understand that it was not all a dream, but a startling reality—at once gave her hand to our young hero, whom she then recognised as the same individual that had lent his succour when the accident occurred to the carriage. Christian's countenance was exceedingly pale: for the news of Sir John Steward's death had been communicated as abruptly as the incident itself had occurred; and much as he had loathed and abhorred the man, yet he could not remain unsusceptible of horror at his awful fate.

"You experience, my dear Ashton," said Beverley, "the same feeling as myself. I am shocked and appalled: but it would savour of the vilest hypocrisy to profess affliction for an occurrence which is heaven's retribution itself. This is now my mansion—and you, Ashton, are indeed a welcome guest!"

At that instant the young Baronet's eyes settled upon Mrs. Oxenden, who was advancing with the air of the humblest supplicant. A burning indignation sprang up to his countenance—his arm was already stretching forth to bid her avaunt—his lips were wreathing to form the word "Begone!"—when Laura, smitten with commiseration for the abject appearance of her lately imperious relative, murmured, "Remember, dearest Edgar, she is my sister!"

"True, said Beverley: and then he instantaneously recollected that his intended bride could not with decency remain beneath that roof unless in the companionship of a female relation. "Mrs. Oxenden," he went on to observe, "to say that I forgive you, is to proclaim as much as you can ever expect to hear from my lips: but you cannot suppose that friendship will exist between us. Remain here for the present—I do not consign your sister to your care—thank heaven, I am now in a position to befriend and protect her: but perhaps you will endeavour by your attentions to atone as much as possible for that past conduct which I will forbear from designating by terms as harsh as it merits."

Mrs. Oxenden took Laura's hand, and looked most plaintively in her face, as if to beseech her sympathy, her pardon, and the restoration of her love: but generous-hearted, magnanimous, as well as kindly gentle though the young maiden were, it was nevertheless impossible that she could in a moment put away from her recollection the sense of the bitter wrongs and persecution that she had experienced at the hands of her sister.

"I will not speak a reproachful word to you," she said in a low tremulous voice, while tears trickled down her cheeks: "but as for ever again being as we once were towards each other, I fear——"

Laura however left the remainder of the sentence unuttered; and as she still clung to her lover's arm, she was compelled to turn away from her sister, because Sir Edgar Beverley at the moment was about to address a few words to Mr. Andrews.

"I bear no animosity, sir, against you," he said; "because I am well aware that you have only performed your professional duty; and moreover I have not forgotten that you flung in a word or two with the hope of checking the savage impetuosity of my deceased uncle. If it suit your other engagements, I beg that you will remain here for the present, to superintend the arrangements for the funeral, and to give me all requisite information with regard to a property which I have inherited so abruptly and with which I am so little acquainted."

The lawyer bowed an assent to the proposal; and then said, "Does it suit you, Sir Edgar, that I should issue on your behalf any instructions with reference to those varlets who treated yourself and your friend so roughly?"

"No—let nothing be changed until the funeral shall have taken place," rejoined Sir Edgar Beverley.

Shortly afterwards the inmates of Verner House separated to their respective chambers; and on the following morning instructions were given with respect to the funeral. Christian at the same time proceeded into Ramsgate, where he inquired for the friendly mountebank: and he found him at his lodging in the obscure court. The news of Sir John Steward's death had not reached the man's ears; and he could scarcely believe his own senses when he thus received the intelligence from our young hero.

"I hope, sir, you do not take me for a coward," he said, "that I ran away so precipitately last night——"

"Such is not the impression of Sir Edgar Beverley or myself," interrupted our hero: "for you bore your part well until you saw that all was lost; and we could not expect you to peril your own safety any farther. I come to you thus early, for fear lest you should be thinking of a retreat from the town. Sir Edgar Beverley has sent you a small testimonial of his gratitude: and should circumstances ever transpire to render the services of a friend needful, you must not hesitate to apply to the Baronet."

With these words Christian placed a purse in the hands of the mountebank, and then hurried away. When the itinerant came to examine the contents of that purse, he found himself possessed of a little fortune of twenty guineas; so that the whole court rang with the joyous "huzzah!" which burst from his lips; and all the inhabitants of the said court were in a moment electrified as well as amazingly edified by the extraordinary antics which he began to perform.

Our young hero next proceeded to the Royal Hotel, where he liquidated Sir Edgar Beverley's account, and availed himself of the temporary absence of the landlord to settle his own: for be it borne in mind that the generous-hearted proprietor of the establishment had invited him to remain there as long as he thought fit, free of all charge. This was however a license which Christian's natural pride would not suffer him to use: and he therefore liquidated his own score with liberality. He ordered the trunks to be forwarded to Verner House; and having thus transacted his business in the town, returned to that mansion. Nothing more worth special notice occurred during that day; and it was at a somewhat early hour in the evening that the inmates withdrew to their respective chambers; for there was a general sense of weariness after the varied and thrilling incidents of the preceding night.

Christian had been perhaps about half-an-hour in his own room, and was yet but partially undressed,—for he had been sitting down to reflect on all those circumstances in which he had become so mixed up,—when the door slowly opened and Mrs. Oxenden made her appearance. She had completely disapparelled herself of her day-costume, and was now attired in the simplest *negligée:* a muslin wrapper was thrown so loosely around her that it revealed far more of her really superb neck and bosom than was consistent with modesty; and yet there was an utter absence of any indication to prove a studied voluptuous display on her part. Indeed, it all had so natural an air that it appeared as if in the excitement of her feelings she had hurriedly slipped on that muslin wrapper without reference to the closing of its folds in decent propriety. The luxuriant masses of her raven hair fell in heavy tresses upon her admirably sloping shoulders; and the band which circled her waist just drew in the wrapper sufficiently to develope the well-proportinned symmetry of her shape. Her naked feet had been thrust into slippers; and her well-formed ankles, white and well rounded, but of shapely slenderness, glanced beneath the skirt of her dress. Immediately upon making her appearance, she placed her forefinger upon her lip to enjoin silence; and then she closed the door. Christian's countenance flashed with mingled surprise and indignation: he was about to bid her begone, when she conveyed to him that indication of silence; and therefore the word to which he was on the point of giving utterance remained unspoken.

"You are surprised—perhaps you are shocked, Mr. Ashton, at this proceeding on my part," began Mrs. Oxenden, her looks expressing the most languishing entreaty as she accosted our young hero: "but I beseech you to hear me with patience."

"It were well, madam," he coldly responded, "if you had chosen a more suitable time and place for any communication which you may have to make me:"—and he glanced significantly towards the door.

"Mr. Ashton, I am the most miserable of women!" quickly resumed Mrs. Oxenden, with a look and tone of passionate entreaty. "I implore you to listen to me!"

"Not here—not now!" ejaculated Christian. "I insist that you leave me!"

"I cannot—I will not!" she rejoined, as if she were half frenzied. "Ever since your return from the town in the forenoon, I have endeavoured to find an opportunity to speak to you alone—but you would not afford it to me—you seemed to conjecture my object and purposely to avoid me."

"It may be that I did so," answered Christian: "but if you have really anything to say to me, you must postpone it to the morrow, when I will not refuse you the opportunity. But to-night—and here——No, it is impossible!—and you do your cause no good, Mrs. Oxenden, by coming to me in such circumstances. I now insist that you leave me."

She turned away from our hero for an instant as if about to seek the door,—when suddenly bending

her looks upon him again, she said with so peculiar an expression of countenance that it well suited the words she uttered, "Yes—I will leave you!—but it will be to quit the house likewise—the sea flows at no great distance beneath the cliffs—and it is deep enough to engulph even a miserable woman who has no longer any reason to cumber this world with her presence!"

"Wretched creature, what do you mean?" exclaimed our hero, clutching her by the wrist as she appeared about to retreat precipitately from the chamber. "Would you to your other misdeeds add the still greater one of suicide? would you crown all your past iniquities by so heinous a crime as this? No! rather study to repent of whatsoever evil you may have done; and at least by your future conduct make such atonement as lies in your power."

"But if every one looks coldly upon me—if every one seems to scorn and revile me," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, with a tone and look that seemed to express mingled anguish and bitterness—"wherefore should I remain upon earth?"

"That persons look coldly upon you," replied Christian, "is scarcely to be wondered at, as your own conscience must but too faithfully tell you. But that you have been reviled, I do not believe——"

"Nevertheless it is true!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden vehemently. "The day which has just drawn to a close, has been for me one prolonged agony. If I have encountered a domestic upon the stairs, he has flung at me some taunt—because they all look upon me as the instigatrix and the cause of the deceased Baronet's conduct—a conduct in which they were more or less implicated, and which they know full well will shortly lead to their dismissal. Just now the maid-servants whom I summoned to assist at my night toilet, flung insults at me——"

"Can all this be indeed true?" asked Christian, with mingled astonishment and indignation.

"It is true!" responded Mrs. Oxenden, the tears trickling down her cheeks, and her half-naked bosom heaving with convulsing sobs. "Oh, it is true!—and it is more than I can bear!"

"But Sir Edgar Beverley," replied our hero quickly, "is ignorant of this—and not for a moment would he permit it. Whatever you may have been—whatever you may have done—so long as by his sanction you remain beneath his roof it is not for these menials to insult or taunt you—they who were themselves the too ready instruments of their vile master——though heaven forgive me for speaking thus strongly against him now that he is gone!"

"Can you wonder that I am excited? can you wonder that I am frenzied—that I am half mad?" asked Mrs. Oxenden, speaking with vehement rapidity. "My sister looks coldly upon me—Sir Edgar addresses me in monosyllables—you avoid me—Mr. Andrews displays a freezing politeness, which in itself is worse than downright rudeness—the domestics taunt me—and then this evening the maid-servants boldly refuse to obey me: so that well-nigh driven to madness, I resolved to fly to you! And then too," she added, in a tone that suddenly became soft and languishing, "there was another reason——"

"Listen, Mrs. Oxenden!" interrupted our hero. "You are safe from further insult for the remainder of this night: I will take the earliest opportunity to-morrow morning to speak to Sir Edgar. And now leave me!"

For an instant Mrs. Oxenden bit her lip with vexation. She had studiously arrayed herself in that meretricious manner in the hope of exercising the influence of her charms upon our hero's passions: she had succeeded in drawing him into conversation, and in already remaining for ten minutes in his room, despite his first peremptory command that she should retire: it was true that he had spoken to her with averted countenance, and that not for a single instant had his eyes lingered upon her voluptuously exposed charms: but still she had flattered herself that she had obtained a sufficient footing in that chamber to give promise of success in the design which she had formed,—when all in a moment he had cut her short and once more peremptorily bidden her begone! Thus was it that for an instant she bit her lip with vexation: but the next moment regaining complete control over herself, she resolved to return to her siege-batteries and play off the artillery of her charms and wiles on points which she hoped would be more vulnerable and sensitive. Her first aim had been to appeal to his magnanimous sympathy by an exaggeration of some few little slights which she had received at the hands of the domestics; and artfully cunning as she was, she knew that, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, for a beautiful woman to engage a man's compassion was already going far towards conquering him completely.

"You bid me quit you chamber, Mr. Ashton," she said, "in a tone which corresponds but indifferently with the generosity of the remarks you had previously made, and with the magnanimity of the feeling you displayed towards me. You have heard me thus far: you must hear me on to the end!"

"Mrs. Oxenden, I insist upon your leaving me!" exclaimed Christian, in whose mind suspicions of a sinister purpose on her part were engendered by the pertinacity with which she lingered in his chamber. "This is most indecent—most indecorous! If you have a woman's shame or pride——"

"Oh, now *you* revile and taunt me likewise—wretched, wretched woman that I am!"—and weeping and sobbing as if her heart would break, she threw herself with every appearance of frantic distress upon the nearest chair.

"I entreat—I conjure that you will tranquillize yourself!" said Christian, bewildered whether to give her credit for the most genuine sincerity, or to behold in her conduct the confirmation of his former suspicion. "These sounds of affliction will be heard—and what will be thought——"

"Oh, speak not unkindly to me!" murmured the wily woman: and as if quite unconscious of of her actions, she still further disarranged her dress—so that all the voluptuous contours of her bust were completely exposed.

"Madam," said Christian indignantly, "leave me this moment—or I myself will seek another chamber—and to-morrow morning will proclaim wherefore I did so!"

"Cruel, cruel!" murmured Mrs. Oxenden,—"and I who love you madly—I who have been smitten with an irresistible passion—I who, not-

withstanding your coldness, have a heart that burns with fervour for you——"

For a moment Christian Ashton was so completely stupefied by these words that he was transfixed to the spot and rendered speechless. The next instant Mrs. Oxenden's arms were wound about his neck—she strained him to her bosom—she pressed her lips to his cheek: and then another instant, and with an effort the violence of which when exercised towards a female, could only be justified by the peculiarity of the circumstances, our young hero disengaged himself from her embrace. Mrs. Oxenden,—who was not to be so easily subdued, and who was really inspired with passion on account of the youth's personal beauty, as well as influenced by policy in her endeavour to gain over Sir Edgar Beverley's intimate friend,—despaired not of success. Her arts and wiles were to be redoubled in order to secure her triumph. Such was her thought: and falling upon her knees, she stretched forth her arms towards Christian, exclaiming, "Cruel youth! Why thus spurn a woman who is dying for you? Am I repulsive?—on the contrary, am I not beautiful?"

"Will you leave me?" demanded Christian vehemently: for he was determined that the scene should end that instant.

"No, no—I will not!—and you cannot be so cruel——"

Our young hero waited to hear no more: but driven almost to his wit's end, he snatched one of the wax-lights from the mantel-piece and hurried from the room. Mrs. Oxenden—whose own sensuous temperament, vicious disposition, and long career of immorality, had hitherto rendered her incredulous in respect to the existence of virtue in others, and who believed that at least every man was "in his heart a rake" (thus reversing as to sex Pope's memorable assertion), was astounded at Christian's abrupt disappearance: and it was now *her* turn to remain stupefied and transfixed on the spot.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE NEGRESS.

THE chamber which our hero had just left, was situated in a passage whence communicated the doors of several other sleeping-apartments, which he knew to be unoccupied. Into the first of these did he therefore plunge: but he closed the door with such rapidity that the current of air thus produced, extinguished the candle. Between the openings of the window-draperies the brightness of the night shone with sufficient clearness to show him at a glance that the bed was untenanted, as he had expected to find it: and he lost not a moment in locking the door, so as to prevent the intrusion of Mrs. Oxenden.

He threw himself upon the bed, and began to reflect upon everything that had just occurred. That she had purposed to play off the artillery of her wiles upon him, and ensnare him into an amour, he could not possibly doubt: and he had therefore no difficulty in conjecturing her motives. There was her passion to gratify—and there were her interests to be served. At any time, and under any circumstances, he would have loathed the woman who could have thus meretriciously sought to throw herself into the arms of a comparative stranger who had given her not the slightest encouragement: but his abhorrence was unspeakably enhanced when he reflected that it was in the house of death that Mrs. Oxenden had thus given way to the influence of her passions and to the current of her worldly interests,—in a house too, beneath the roof of which her own innocent sister was reposing—and at a time when only twenty-four hours had elapsed since this self-same mansion had proved the scene of a frightful tragedy. Yes: our hero experienced the deepest loathing—the intensest abhorrence—for that unprincipled and unscrupulous woman; and he resolved to communicate everything to Sir Edgar Beverley in the morning.

He lay thus reflecting for perhaps a quarter of an hour, when he thought that he might just as well disapparel himself completely (for he was only half undressed) and retire to rest. This he accordingly did: but when he had entered the couch on which he had been previously lying, it was still some time ere slumber began to steal upon his eyes. He was just in that state when the senses are rocking themselves—or rather sinking into the dreamy repose which is the last stage preceding the oblivion of profound slumber: his breathing was slow and regular, as if he already slept completely: so that any one might imagine he did really thus sleep. And now it was that he became aware of some sound which, though slight, brought him back in a moment to full wakefulness. He did not however move: he lay perfectly still—and listened. The handle of the door was evidently turning; and then there was the sound as if some one were endeavouring to push or pull it open. Christian's first thought was that Mrs. Oxenden was trying the door: but he knew full well that she could not enter—for he had locked it, as already observed. But, ah! what sound was it which next met his ear? The key itself was turning in the lock; and this could not be effected by any one on the outside of the door—the individual must be in the room itself. He started up: the extremity of the chamber where the door was situated, was involved in almost complete obscurity: yet through the gloom he could distinguish some shape—a human one. He had no superstitious terror: he sprang from the bed—there was a half-stifled cry, or rather shriek, from the lips of the person who was endeavouring to open the door: at the same moment Christian's hands clutched her garments—for she was a female; and she fell upon her knees, beseeching his mercy. This woman was the negress.

"Silence!" ejaculated Christian: "I will do you no harm. Remain quiet for a moment."

Locking the door again, he drew forth the key to prevent her escape until he had questioned her: and then he proceeded to huddle on a portion of his clothing.

"Now," he said, "will you tell me what you are doing here"

"The new master," replied the negress, alluding to Sir Edgar Beverley, "or rather that gentleman the lawyer, who spoke for him last night, ordered me to leave the house: but I could not—where

was I to go? Besides, I hoped that I should be forgiven: so I concealed myself in this room, where I remained all day without a morsel of food. I went down stairs just now to the pantry to get some: I came up again: but scarcely had I been five minutes in the chamber, when the door opened suddenly——I had forgotten to lock it as I intended to do——and some one rushed in. The light went out so quickly that I could not see who it was; and I thought I had better stay quiet until whoever it might be should fall asleep. I fancied that you slept, sir—and was going to leave the chamber with as little noise as possible——"

"Well, well, I know the rest," observed Christian—and then for a few moments he deliberated with himself what he should do: but remembering that it was impossible to turn a woman out of the house at that hour of the night—indeed, being incapable of such an act of cruelty, no matter how well it might suit her deserts—he was about to tell her to seek another apartment, when the thought struck him that her secret presence in the mansion despite of Mr. Andrews' peremptory order to quit it, might have some ulterior motive beyond that which she had alleged. He therefore said, "You tell me you had nowhere to go? How long had you been employed in the late Sir John Steward's service?"

"About seven years," replied the woman: and we should observe that she spoke in broken English and execrable grammar—but we do not feel disposed to give any verbal representation of her diction.

"Your duties, if I guess aright," said our hero, "can have been but little creditable to yourself, considering the master whom you served: and such duties are always well remunerated. You must therefore have amassed gold—and yet you will endeavour to make me believe that you are completely pauperised, without the means of providing yourself with a lodging. How do you account for this inconsistency?"

"I do not altogether understand you," said the negress. "I am a stranger in your country——"

"A stranger indeed!—and you have been seven years in Sir John Steward's service!" exclaimed Christian,—"a time sufficient to render you familiar enough with the meaning of our language—and an employment which was only too well calculated to enlarge your experiences. Come, speak frankly: the season for artifice and disguise has gone by—you will do yourself no good by attempting to deceive me."

As Christian thus spoke he strained his eyes hard to study the countenance of the negress in the gloom of that part of the chamber where they stood: but he could not distinguish any of her features except her eyes. She remained silent; but he could judge that her feelings were those of uneasiness, inasmuch as she fidgetted nervously. His former suspicions were strengthened: indeed they amounted to the conviction that the woman had not truthfully explained the cause of her presence in the house.

"Now," he said, "understand me if you can or will:"—and he spoke with stern decision. "You are here for no good purpose; and if you do not give me the most satisfactory explanation, I shall take measures to detain you for the rest of the night, and to-morrow you will be handed over to the care of a constable. Do you comprehend me?"

"Yes. Pray let me go, sir!" said the woman in a voice of entreaty.

"Ah! now I am more than ever convinced that you are full of treachery and deceit," exclaimed Christian; "and you must speak out. Again will I endeavour to make myself properly understood by you. Deal with me frankly,—and as much mercy shall be shown you as can be displayed under such circumstances as may transpire from the revelations you are about to make: but if on the other hand you persist in refusing explanations, then be not astonished if you find yourself severely treated."

This speech was followed by a silence of nearly a minute—during which the negress was evidently deliberating with herself what course she should adopt. At length she said, hesitatingly and timidly, "What if I was to tell you a secret—a very great secret, Mr. Ashton?"

"Rest assured that it will be all the better for you," responded our hero. "Come—let me put a leading question or two. Mrs. Oxenden knows of your secret presence in the house?"

"No, sir: on my soul she does not!" answered the negress emphatically.

"She does not?" said Christian. "Then why are you here? Once for all tell me: for I am growing impatient. This secret of your's——"

"Will take a long time to explain, sir: and if you have no patience," added the negress, "it will be useless——"

"Plenty of patience if you will only come to the point," interrupted our hero. "It is by no means the most agreeable thing to stand here conversing in the dark——especially," he thought within himself, suddenly leaving off speaking aloud, "as I cannot see your black visage and judge of whether you are trifling with me or not. But come," he added, again addressing himself audibly to the negress; "here are a couple of chairs within the sphere of the moonlight: let us sit down and converse—and you shall tell me this secret of your's."

"Well, I may as well—indeed I must under all circumstances!" muttered the negress: and she suffered herself to be led forward to a chair near the toilet-table which stood against one of the windows of the room,—Christian himself taking another, so that he exactly faced her.

"Now," he said, "I am all attention."

"Perhaps you know, sir," resumed the negress,—"or perhaps you do *not*—in which case I must tell you—that when I first came into Sir John Steward's service, between seven and eight years ago, the masons and bricklayers were altering and repairing this house. Sir John did not habitually live here then—but chiefly in London: but I was put here, along with another woman, to get the house in readiness and set everything to rights, as the masons were just finishing their work."

"And what on earth," ejaculated Christian, "has all this to do with your presence here to-night? Beware how you trifle with me!"

"I told you, sir, that the tale would be rather a long one," answered the negress; "and if you are already impatient——"

"I was wrong," interposed our hero. "Continue in your own way."

"Well, sir," resumed the black woman, "I must tell you that those masons and bricklayers were all sent down from London to do the work; and the moment it was finished they went away, liberally rewarded. And no wonder!—for there is a secret connected with the house which I am now going to explain. It is so contrived that there is a room the existence of which no one suspects who does not already know that secret—and it is reached by a means of communication so cunningly and craftily devised, that a person might live a dozen years in the mansion without entertaining the remotest idea of all these mysteries."

"This sounds most strange!" said Christian. "How is it possible that such space can be taken up inside a house without the fact being suspected?"

"The secret room," continued the negress, "is very long but very narrow: it is a sort of slip taken off the passage lengthways, on the next storey—the one up above, I mean. It is lighted by a window in the roof; and a very narrow staircase is the means of reaching it. The walls are so thick, or else so well contrived by the masons who made the place, that no one in the adjoining chambers on the one side, or in the passage on the other, could possibly overhear anything that took place in that chamber. The sky-light on the roof has a double casement; and this likewise deadens all sound from within. The whole arrangement is as curious as it is clever: for there are devices to maintain a healthful supply of fresh air. In a word, the place must have cost Sir John Steward a great deal of money."

"And now that you have finished the romance of your story," said Christian, who did not believe a syllable of all that had just been told him, though he could not for the life of him conjecture

why the negress should be devising such a narrative,—"you will perhaps tell me for what uses the mysterious room served?"

"I suppose I need not inform you, sir," continued the black woman, who did not perceive by our hero's tone how her veracity was suspected, "that Sir John Steward was a very gay gentleman, and that many a young girl has fallen his victim?"

"I have indeed heard enough," responded Christian, "to convince me that here at least you are speaking nothing but the truth. But that secret apartment——"

"Often served, sir," rejoined the negress, "as a place of imprisonment for some lovely creature who fell into the snare set for her, or was carried off by violence. Only conceive a young woman brought into this house and consigned to a room like any other—this one, for instance,—falling off fast asleep, when, worn out with fatigue and perhaps with grief, she had taken some refreshment—for Sir John knew well enough how to drug even tea or coffee—and then awaking to find herself in a living tomb from which it was told her she would never be allowed to go forth until she complied with his desires——"

"Good heaven! is this possible?" exclaimed Christian, his incredulity vanishing, and his interest in the black woman's tale becoming all the more fearfully vivid as it seemed suddenly to be stamped with truthfulness.

"It is quite possible, sir, because I have seen it over and over again with my own eyes."

"And perhaps, accursed hag! you yourself have aided in all those black satanic villanies?"

"There, sir!—what mercy have I to expect," asked the trembling negress, "at your hands, when you burst out upon me in this way?"

"Go on—go on," said Christian, mastering his burning indignation as well as he was able. "I will interrupt you no more—if I can help it."

"Well, sir, I must trust to your goodness," continued the black woman. "As I have already hinted, there has been many and many a victim in that dreadful place; and then, when innocence turned into dishonour and degradation, there was either an anxiety to screen it all on the part of the sufferer—or else, when once lost, she accepted her position of an established mistress—and when cast off, retired with a goodly pension: so that what with one way or another, the secret of that mysterious chamber was never betrayed. And let me tell you, sir, that the device was infallible; for the poor victim, however virtuously inclined, and however strenuously she resisted at first, always succumbed at last, when either worn out in spirit—exhausted—half-maddened—or reduced to desperation!"

Christian was about to give vent to another outburst of his feelings: but he controlled himself, and suffered the negress to proceed.

"Of all the servants of the house," she continued, "myself and the woman of whom I have spoken, alone knew the secret of the mysterious chamber. That woman died about a year back: and thus the secret remained with me—for there was no one else in the establishment to whom Sir John thought fit to confide it. However, he and I sufficed to bear up to that room any drugged and insensible victim——"

"And you, I suppose," said Christian, scarcely able to repress the indignant bitterness of his feelings or prevent them from showing themselves in his accents,—"you, I suppose, were the attendant upon these unfortunate victims of a hideous lust—you witnessed their tears—you turned a deaf ear to their prayers—perhaps you used threats—— But go on, go on—and let me know to what issue your narrative of abominations is tending."

"A few days ago, sir," continued the negress, "in the middle of the very night before Mrs. Oxenden arrived from Brighton on her second visit——"

"You mean when she brought her sister Laura hither?" said Christian inquiringly.

"Exactly so, sir. In the middle of that night, a certain well-known signal was given, by the pulling of a particular bell at the front door, but which bell rang in Sir John's room. He speedily got up, and came to summon me. I knew what it meant: the thing had often and often happened before. We went down to the front door—and received a beautiful young creature from the care of a couple of women and a man who had carried her off by force from some place, I don't know where, and brought her down to Verner House."

"And those wretches, I presume," said Christian, "were the infamous agents who pandered to Sir John Steward's lusts, and whom he doubtless kept continually in his pay?"

"Just so, sir," answered the negress. "They had a roving commission, if I may use the term, empowering them to pick up beauties wherever they could find them, and bring them straight to Verner House. No matter the distance, they might take post-chaises for hundreds of miles—they knew perfectly well that Sir John would pay for them liberally, as well as all their other expenses——"

"No doubt!" observed Christian. "But about this beautiful girl of whom you are speaking?"

"She was in a dead swoon, sir, when delivered into our hands," answered the negress: "for it seems she had been brought a good many, many miles—and she was worn out with fatigue and grief. Everything was done silently and cautiously as usual; but there was no need to drug whatsoever refreshments she stood in need of—for, as I tell you, she was in a swoon—and we took her right up to the secret chamber. Sir John was terribly vexed——"

"Vexed! And why?" asked Christian, astonished at such a remark. "How could he be vexed?—why was it?"

"Because he expected Mrs. Oxenden and her sister next day," replied the negress: "he meant to marry the sister, as you already know—and therefore the presence of the new beauty in the secret chamber was an embarrassment and an encumbrance rather than a source of hope and delight."

"Then why did he receive her at all?" asked Christian, fancying that he discerned an inconsistency in the black woman's tale.

"Because the agents who had brought her could not possibly take her back," responded the negress: "and because, under those circumstances, Sir John made up his mind that he would keep her here until after his marriage with Miss Hall, when it was to be my duty to restore her to free-

dom,—first binding her by the most fearful of oaths that she would never betray the place to which she had been brought. And then, too, I was to make it appear that I risked everything by conniving at her escape, and that I must throw myself upon her gratitude for keeping the secret. Or if the worst should have happened, Sir John could easily have gone on the Continent with his young bride Laura, whom he hoped to possess—until everything was blown over. Such was the plan, Mr. Ashton: but as you perceive, death has made a wonderful change in the house——"

"And the old man possessed *not* his intended bride," remarked Christian solemnly; "and the hand of heaven itself interposed to prevent that hideous sacrifice. But this young lady of whom you are speaking——"

"My tale will soon be ended," rejoined the negress. "A few hours back I communicated to the young lady that when night came I would restore her to freedom; and—and—it was my intention to fulfil this promise just now—indeed I was on the point of ascertaining if the house were all quiet, when you so suddenly burst into the room——"

"This room?" ejaculated Christian. "Then, it was a falsehood that you were stealing forth to visit the pantry to procure food?"

"Yes, sir—it certainly was not the truth," answered the negress: "but I am telling you all the truth now——"

"And you must convince me of it!" rejoined our young hero. "I will see this young lady—she shall be restored to freedom—she must be made acquainted with all that has taken place——"

"I have told her, sir," interrupted the negress, "that she has nothing more to fear—that Sir John Steward is dead—that a new Baronet is in possession of the house——and I offered to do everything I could to see her to some place of safety, or provide her with a post-chaise to take her home——"

"And where does she live? and what is her name? Who is she?" demanded Christian.

"I know not, sir," replied the negress: "she mistrusts me—she will not give me her confidence—she will tell me nothing——"

"And no wonder!" observed our hero. "But why take measures to effect her egress so secretly from the house? why not, when Sir John Steward was smitten down by the hand of death—why not, I ask, have at once given this poor persecuted young lady her liberty?"

"Ah! Mr. Ashton," said the negress, "do you not understand how embittered Sir Edgar Beverley and that lawyer are against me?—and would they not have immediately sent me to prison as the accomplice of the late Baronet in keeping this young lady in custody? So I thought I would at least get her quietly out of the house—and then, to tell you the truth, I might shift for myself. You see how candidly I am speaking—I hope you will take it all into account——"

"You have been a very wicked woman," interrupted Christian; "but I do not hesitate to promise that you shall be suffered to depart with impunity, provided that no additional circumstances transpire to stamp you with any deeper iniquity than that which you have confessed. But now let us conclude the business as speedily as possible. You have yet to explain your presence in this room—concealed here all in the dark——"

"A few words will make you acquainted with everything, sir," resumed the negress. "The secret entrance to the staircase leading to the prison-chamber is in this room. I had just emerged thence at the moment when you burst in; and if your candle had not so suddenly gone out, you must have seen me. I dared not move—I kept in the deep shade of that recess, until I fancied you were asleep; and then I endeavoured to leave the chamber stealthily, with the intention of hiding myself in some unoccupied apartment until a more favourable opportunity should present itself for the liberation of the young lady."

"But if the secret entrance to the staircase is in *this* room," said Christian, "why did you not beat a retreat——"

"Look, sir!" ejaculated the negress: and rising from her chair, she passed towards the recess to which she had just now alluded.

A sharp click—evidently the action of some secret spring—fell upon Christian's ear; and the next moment a strong light threw its rays into the chamber. This occurred with such magical suddenness, and the hideous form of the negress was so abruptly thrown out into strong relief—the light itself flashed with such lightning celerity upon our young hero's eyes—that he started and could scarcely repress an ejaculation of wonderment mingled even with a transient terror. He perceived that a door had opened in the wall, and that on the foot of a staircase which was thus revealed within, a lamp was standing. It was a lamp with a globe of ground glass;—it was of moderate size too, such as is used for a small parlour; and the negress had evidently left it there to light herself up again on her intended return to the secret chamber.

"If I had opened this door, sir," she said to Christian, "at the instant you burst into the room, you would of course have seen it; and if I had done so when you were in bed, there was the probability of the light flashing upon your eyes and awakening you."

"True!" observed our hero: then, having hastily huddled on all the rest of his garments, he said, "And now take that lamp and lead the way."

The negress did as she was ordered—and conducted Christian up a very narrow staircase, the walls of which were wainscotted; and at the top she halted for a moment to draw back the bolt of a door covered with green baize. As this door swung open outwardly, Christian perceived that it was of great thickness; and there was an inner door, also covered with baize, and which opened inward—so that it was but too evident that every precaution had been taken to render the secret chamber a veritable living tomb,—the walls, doors, and skylights of which should beat back every sound of grief, despair, or anguish which might emanate from the lips of whomsoever Sir John Steward's lustful iniquity rendered a captive there.

The inner door swung open; and the negress, as she thus passed into the room, said, "Fear not, young lady—this gentleman comes for a friendly purpose."

The next instant Christian Ashton crossed the

threshold and entered the chamber: ejaculations of mingled joy and astonishment burst from the lips of both himself and the young lady who was a captive there; and the next moment they were clasped in each other's arms.

"Dearest Christian!"

"Dearest, dearest Isabella!"

And to both did it all appear to be a dream.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

ISABELLA AT VERNER HOUSE.

THE negress was transfixed with a perfect bewilderment on thus perceiving that our handsome young hero and that beautiful dark-eyed girl were so far from being strangers to each other that they must be either lovers or else brother and sister: but by the fond endearing words which the youth lavished upon the charming Isabella, the black woman was speedily convinced that the former suspicion was the correct one—namely, that they were lovers.

Isabella was dressed in deep mourning, which she wore for the death of her uncle the Earl of Lascelles; and though the animation of joy was now upon her countenance, and a kindred light was beaming in her swimming eyes, yet had Christian seen her when seated by herself just before she thus flew into his arms, he would with pain and sorrow have observed that she was pale and careworn. Oh! with what rapture did he strain her to his breast; and with what fond confiding love did the beauteous maiden receive and give back his caresses, and then cling to his arm,—looking up with affectionate gratitude into his countenance as that of not only her lover, but her deliverer!

"Dearest, dearest Isabella," said Christian, "you have now nothing more to fear—you will find yourself amongst friends beneath this roof where hitherto you have been in the power of enemies! Oh! we have much to say to each other!"

"Yes—much, much!" murmured the charming girl: and Christian felt that she shuddered with a strong spasmodic quivering of the form as she clung to his arm! "Oh! I have suffered deeply, deeply, since we parted—not only here"—and she glanced around the secret chamber (which, we should observe, was most comfortably furnished, though a horrible prison all the same)—"but likewise in London!"

"My poor Isabella!" said Christian, the tears trickling down his cheeks—and he once more strained her to his breast, both the while totally oblivious, in the rapture of their feelings, that the horrible black woman was present in that chamber. "You stand in need of rest—you will sleep sweetly, my beloved," continued our hero, "now that you are conscious of safety. To-morrow we will tell each other all that we may mutually have to impart. Come, dearest Isabella—tarry not another instant in this place which you must loathe and abhor. Ah, you are here!" ejaculated Christian, as his eyes now suddenly settled upon the negress while she was about to conduct Miss Vincent from the room.

"The young lady will tell you, sir," said the black woman, "that I have not been unkind to her."

"The wretch!" murmured Isabella, shuddering: and then she hastily added, "But we can now afford to forgive her, dear Christian—and I willingly admit that apart from being my gaoler, I have no cause of complaint against her. She promised me my liberty—but I dared not believe her: I dreaded some new treachery—some fresh snare——indeed, I was so wretched—half wild, half mad—that I knew not what to think when she told me of her infamous master's death, and of strange things that had taken place within the walls of this house."

"Think not of the past, my beloved," said Christian, pressing her fair hand in his own: "no one can molest you now—no one will even think of attempting it. As for you," he continued, addressing himself to the negress, "I promised you impunity under certain circumstances—and nothing has transpired to induce me to fly from my word. Remain you in the house for the rest of the night: but perhaps you will do as well to take your departure at an early hour in the morning. I do not ask if you are possessed of funds: for one who has served Sir John Steward as *you* have served him, cannot possibly fail to have a well-filled purse."

The black woman's look showed that our hero was by no means wrong in his surmise; and muttering some words of thanks for the impunity which was guaranteed her, she turned to descend the stairs.

"Stop!" exclaimed Christian, darting forward and holding her back: "*we*, if you please, will lead the way:"—for the thought had flashed to his mind that there was a strong bolt to the exterior side of the outer door.

"I have no interest in playing a treacherous part," said the negress.

Our hero took no notice of the observation—but, carrying the lamp in his hand, he conducted Isabella down the staircase—the negress following with the light which she had taken from the table in the chamber. Christian unlocked the door of the bedroom with which the moveable panel in the wall communicated: he conducted Isabella forth; and indicating an unoccupied chamber, gave her the lamp at the door, pressed her hand, and instantaneously withdrew. The negress disappeared to some other part of the building: our hero entered the room where he had established his own temporary quarters; and in the midst of the most delicious thoughts—thoughts of purest, holiest love—a sweet sleep stole upon his eyes.

He awoke at a very early hour in the morning; and for some minutes could scarcely persuade himself that the incidents of the preceding night were not all a dream. The panel-door, however, still stood open; and this was a confirmation of the reality of all those occurrences. Curiosity prompted him to examine the door: he discovered where the secret spring was situated—how it worked—and where it had to be touched, on either the inner or outer side, so as to make the door open for egress or ingress. Then, on its being shut he could not help admiring with what exquisite nicety it was made to fit into its setting; so that no eye, however scrutinizing, could possibly detect any indication of the existence of such

a door. This survey being finished, and some of his apparel being huddled on, he repaired to his own chamber for the sake of the conveniences of the toilet. Mrs. Oxenden was not there—but he perceived a billet upon the toilet-table: it was addressed to himself—and the handwriting was the beautiful fluid one of a lady. For an instant he hesitated to open it: but this indecision was quickly overruled by the thought that as he had made up his mind to communicate to his friend the Baronet everything that had occurred, he would show Sir Edgar this letter likewise, whatsoever its contents might be, and no matter how earnest should be its pleadings for his forbearance, his silence, and his secresy.

He accordingly opened it. We need not transcribe its contents: suffice it to say that they were of the nature which our young hero had anticipated. In this billet Mrs. Oxenden pleaded the strength of an irresistible passion as an excuse for the conduct of the preceding evening: she appealed to Christian whether he did not consider her sufficiently humiliated and mortified by the rejection of her advances, to abstain from inflicting upon her the additional punishment of exposure: she proclaimed herself a wretched woman—and finished by soliciting his mercy.

Christian's toilet was speedily completed; and he repaired at once to Sir Edgar Beverley's chamber. The young Baronet was close upon the termination of his own toilet: and he immediately saw that our hero had something important to communicate. In the fewest possible words Christian related to the wondering Sir Edgar all the incidents of the past night,—how Mrs. Oxenden had sought him in his own chamber—how he had fled to another—how he had there encountered the negress—how she had revealed to him the mysteries of the secret chamber—how he had proceeded thither—and how in the captive he had recognised one as dear to him as Laura was to Sir Edgar Beverley himself.

"And here," added Christian, "is a billet which I found in my own room just now. I think you will admit, my dear Sir Edgar, that no lenient terms are to be kept with a woman of this character—and that there is nothing unmanly on my part in disregarding her appeal for secresy—nothing dishonourable in showing the letter to you."

"On the contrary, my dear Ashton," answered the Baronet: "it was your duty to show me this letter—and for more reasons than one. An assemblage of the most marvellous circumstances has rendered a being who is so dear to you an inmate of Verner House; and she shall be welcomed as a guest with all the warmth of that friendship which is experienced for you. In her Laura will find a companion and a friend: and the necessity for her infamous sister's presence here, at once ceases. Moreover, it would be an insult to yourself—and an insult to Miss Vincent, to bring her into contact with a being so degraded, so polluted, as this Mrs. Oxenden. Yes—she shall depart—and within the hour that is passing! Come, my friend—we will go and give all suitable directions for the ensurance of the comfort of Miss Vincent."

Sir Edgar's toilet was speedily finished: he and our hero descended to the breakfast-parlour; and almost immediately afterwards Laura made her appearance. When the usual greetings were exchanged, Sir Edgar addressed his beloved in the following manner:—

"My dear Laura, it is with deep regret I have to inform you that fresh circumstances have transpired to prove the impropriety of your sister remaining any longer beneath this roof. For your own reputation's sake there must be an immediate and complete severance between you both. You know me too well to suspect for an instant that I should act unjustly or tyrannically; and you will be satisfied, dear Laura, with my simple assurance of the necessity of this step—you will not ask me for those details which would only shock the purity of your own feelings——"

"Alas, my unhappy sister!" murmured the weeping Laura: "but I know, Edgar, that whatever you do is for the best!"

"Thank you, my beloved, for this assurance!" exclaimed the Baronet. "And now wipe away those tears: it is not for you to be saddened by the iniquity of others! No, no—happiness awaits you, Laura——"

"I enjoy it now," she murmuringly added, "in all respects save on my sister's account."

"And fear not," Beverley hastened to observe, "that you will be without a suitable companion. There is one beneath this roof who is worthy to be your friend—whom you will regard as such, and whom you can love. She herself will explain what circumstances brought her hither; and when I add that she is as dear to Mr. Ashton, as you, my Laura, are to me, I know that it is sufficient to induce you to display every attention. Go, therefore, to Miss Vincent, dearest Laura—and in the meanwhile your sister will take her departure."

The young lady quitted the room; and in about five minutes the Baronet rang the bell to inquire, through the medium of one of the female domestics, whether Mrs. Oxenden had yet left her chamber?—for we should observe that Laura now no longer occupied the sleeping apartment which was next to the one tenanted by her sister. Christian temporarily withdrew from the breakfast-parlour, while Sir Edgar Beverley had a last interview with Mrs. Oxenden. We need not enter into minute details of what passed between them on the occasion. Suffice it to say that the lady's eyes flashed malignant fires when she learnt that Christian had communicated everything to the Baronet: but she was somewhat relieved from the bitterness of her vexation when he assured her that, for the sake of her innocent sister, all further exposure would be avoided, on condition that Mrs. Oxenden would at once withdraw from Verner House. To this she was compelled to assent: she saw that her game had been more than played out—that she was irretrievably ruined in the estimation of Sir Edgar Beverley—and that it was likewise useless to make any further attempt to regain a footing in the household. She did not ask for a parting interview with her sister: she knew that it would be interdicted if she proffered the request. The travelling-carriage was ordered to be gotten in readiness with all possible dispatch; and Mrs. Oxenden took her departure, well nigh spirit-broken, and completely dejected and despondent.

Soon after this evil-minded woman's peremptory

and ignominious dismissal from Verner House, Sir Edgar Beverley and all his guests were assembled in the breakfast-parlour. Laura and Isabella had already become excellent friends: the Baronet and Christian were both delighted with the spectacle of the sisterly intimacy which circumstances had caused to spring up all in a moment, as it were, between two such amiable and beautiful beings;—while Mr. Andrews, the solicitor, evidently enjoyed the society with which he now mingled, and which seemed so much more worthy to occupy the splendid apartments of Verner House than the deceased Baronet and his infamous accomplice Mrs. Oxenden. No secret had been made of the discovery of the mysterious chamber on the highest storey of the mansion: every one within those walls was now acquainted with the circumstance: for it was necessary to account for the sudden appearance of Miss Vincent at the house—and it was likewise Sir Edgar Beverley's intention, immediately after his marriage, to set masons and bricklayers to work in order to destroy that chamber and renovate that part of the house in a becoming manner.

Edgar comprehended full well that Christian and Isabella must have much to say to each other. Accordingly, after breakfast, he invited Laura to walk with him in the garden—Mr. Andrews withdrew to the library to write some letters on business—our hero and Miss Vincent now found themselves alone together.

"With you, my dear Christian," said the young maiden, "I can have no secrets—and yet I am about to speak to you of something which *you* must keep secret from all the rest of the world ——unless, indeed," she added mournfully, "you shall be of opinion that another course ought to be adopted: in which case I shall be influenced entirely by you. Oh! it is a dreadful subject!—and I hope, dear Christian—I hope that you will decide in favour of keeping the secret!"

"Good heavens, my dearest Isabella!" exclaimed our hero, astonished and even frightened—for he saw how very pale his beloved became: "what terrible topic is this to which you allude—which you approach with so much diffidence—and over which you are so anxious that the veil of secresy shall be thrown?"

"Alas, dear Christian! it is indeed a very painful topic," rejoined Isabella: "but I will not keep you any longer in suspense. You know how my poor uncle died ——"

"Good God!" ejaculated our hero: "does it allude to his most shocking, horrible murder?"

"It does—alas, it does indeed!" replied Miss Vincent. "And you will be astonished—you will be startled—aye, and horrified too—when I speak of the hideous, frightful mystery—which does not appear to be altogether a mystery—for they accuse each other——"

"They! Who, dearest Isabella?" asked Christian, in the consternation of suspense.

"Who?" echoed the young maiden. "Oh, that I should have to tell you that the Countess and Adolphus—my aunt and my cousin——"

"Impossible, Isabella!" exclaimed Christian. "What? the beautiful Ethel, so amiable and so kind—and the generous-hearted Adolphus, who conducted himself so handsomely in favouring our own interviews——"

"Alas! it is as I tell you, my dear Christian," responded Isabella, in a tone of the deepest dejection, and with a visible shudder passing through her entire form. "Accident one day rendered me a listener to a few words which passed between them. I was entering the Red Drawing-room ——you remember, it has a large screen drawn before the door——and I suppose that though altogether unintentional on my part, I must have opened that door so noiselessly that they did not hear me. I was advancing into the room, but had not at the instant let the door escape from my hand, when I was suddenly transfixed——Oh, Christian! I was petrified with horror—on catching the words that were uttered in low hoarse tones from the lips of each——"

"The Countess and the young Earl?" said Christian, astounded and horror-stricken by what he thus heard: and then, as a thousand little reminiscences swept like a whirlwind in upon his brain, he for the first time comprehended the illicit connexion which had existed between the Countess of Lascelles and Adolphus.

"Yes—I mean that they were talking within the room, hidden from me by the screen, as I also was hidden from them," continued Isabella; "and though their voices were so altered as they spoke—Oh, so altered! yet did I recognise them. And if any further proof were wanting of who the speakers were, I heard them address one another by their Christian names——"

"Good heavens!—this is dreadful," said our young hero. "But what were the words which they spoke on the occasion?"

"Oh! I can too faithfully repeat them," answered the shuddering Isabella: "for at the very instant they were uttered, they seemed to impress themselves with a poignant and acute agony upon my brain, as if seared there with a red hot iron!"

"This is indeed dreadful!" said Christian, whose countenance was now as pale as that of Isabella herself. "And those words which they spoke——"

"I will tell you," rejoined the young damsel. "Lord Osmond—I mean the new Earl of Lascelles, said to the Countess, 'Ethel, it is useless for you to persist in this shocking falsehood. As I told you on a former occasion when we spoke on the subject—the first occasion when we met after the dreadful deed—it was *your* hand that did it!'—'No, Adolphus,' replied the Countess, in a voice as low, deep, and hoarse as his own, 'you know that you are giving utterance to an untruth as base as it is cowardly: it was *your* hand that took the old man's life, murderer that you are!'—'No,' rejoined Adolphus, 'I repeat, Ethel, it is *you* who are the murderess!'"

"Dreadful! horrible!" exclaimed Christian. "My poor Isabella, your blood must have curdled in your veins?"

"No language, dear Christian, can describe what I felt," answered the young lady: "it was indeed dreadful and shocking! I dared not penetrate into the room and face those two. Heaven alone can tell how I regained my own chamber, or whether my presence in that drawing-room had passed undiscovered and unsuspected. But when alone, I reflected on the course I should adopt. To remain any longer beneath that roof was impossible: and to betray to the knowledge of justice

what I had heard, appeared to me equally out of the question. I could not give up my own relatives to the scaffold! Oh, how strenuously did I endeavour to persuade myself that it was all a delusion—and that my brain, fevered by recent illness and horrors, had led me to misinterpret some words that had caught my ears. But no—it was impossible! As I have already told you, Christian, those dreadful words were seared upon my brain as if with a red hot iron. But what was I to do? I did not want to let the guilty ones know that I had overheard them; and yet I was resolved to remain no longer in that house of horror and of crime. I so far conquered my feelings as to appear before them once again. It was at luncheon-time. I had previously been ill: they noticed that I was looking paler than ever—and no wonder! I said something about the influence which recent horrors had exercised on my mind—I spoke of the want of change of scene as well as change of air; and the Countess herself suggested that I should go into the country for a few weeks, under the care of Mrs. Gardiner the housekeeper. I eagerly caught at the proposition, and said that I would leave that very day. I could not look in the face of either of that wretched pair: I know not therefore whether my words produced any peculiar effect upon them——in fact I remembered but little more, until I found myself seated by the side of Mrs. Gardiner in the travelling-carriage."

"And whither did you go?" inquired Christian.

"Mrs. Gardiner's son has a small farm near Tunbridge in Kent: she herself was anxious to see him and her daughter-in-law; and it had therefore been arranged that we should proceed thither to pass as long a time as I might think fit. My own maid was likewise in attendance upon me. We reached our destination in the evening; and I found that my new quarters were established in a comfortable little homestead where every attention was shown me. This was about ten days back; and therefore, you see, I had not been there many days before I was seized upon and carried off by the wretches who brought me hither. I must tell you that an ill-looking elderly woman had accosted me in the morning while I was rambling by myself in the fields; and she addressed me in a familiar style which I did not like. I turned indignantly away; and though annoyed for the time, soon ceased to think of the incident—for, alas! dear Christian, I had other and weightier subjects to occupy my thoughts. In the evening I again walked out: I did not ramble very far—but it was in a secluded lane that I was proceeding, when I was pounced upon by a man and a couple of women—one of the latter being she who had addressed me with such familiar impertinence in the forenoon. To be brief, I was thrust into a post-chaise which was waiting at a little distance: I fell into a deep swoon—and when I came back to consciousness, was being borne along at a rapid rate inside that vehicle, and in the horrible companionship which I have mentioned."

"The wretches!" ejaculated Christian, his cheeks flushing with indignation: and then he strained Isabella in his arms.

"They used the most horrible menaces," continued the young damsel, "to compel me to remain quiet as we passed through villages or towns, or stopped to change horses. I dared not cry out: I feared for my life, helpless as I was in the power of those people. I have a recollection of the man once alighting at some place where we stopped; and I caught the words that he whispered to an inquiring landlord—'Poor creature, she is mad: we are taking her to an asylum!' Then I swooned again, and recovered not my senses till I found myself in the chamber whence you delivered me last night. Oh, the distraction of my thoughts—the frenzy of my feelings, as I really fancied at first that I was in a mad-house! But the negress was there: she told me where I was—and assured me that if I would only remain quiet for a day or two, I should be set at freedom. And now, dear Christian, I have nothing more to tell you. But I have something to ask——"

"I understand what it is, dearest Isabella," exclaimed our hero; "you are anxious on account of the people at the farm, and what they must think of your sudden disappearance, so incomprehensible to them! You shall write a letter at once to Mrs. Gardiner——And will you not tell her, dear Isabel, that you intend to remain here for two or three weeks until your friend Laura is married?—for you cannot possibly leave her, you know, until that event takes place."

And Christian's eyes eloquently added that which his lips left unspoken, and which might have been interpreted thus:—"And you will not deprive *us* of the happiness of being together?"

"Laura has besought me to remain with her," murmured the bashfully blushing Isabella: "and I have promised that I would. But would it be too much—would it be too far imposing upon Sir Edgar Beverley's hospitality, if I were to order the housekeeper and my maid to join me here?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Christian: "it will not offend Sir Edgar—on the contrary, it will give him pleasure to render your visit here as agreeable as possible. Write your letter, dear Isabel—I will go and speak to Sir Edgar at once—and one of his footmen shall take the very next train for Tunbridge; so that within a few hours Mrs. Gardiner and the others at the farm will be relieved of all anxiety concerning you. Yes—for the sake of appearances—for many, many reasons, your servants must be where you yourself are!"

"But you have not told me, Christian," said Isabella, with a look of timid apprehension, as he was about to leave the room, "what your opinion is——"

"Relative to that guilty couple?" added our hero: then, after a few moments' pause, he said, "I fear that the secret must be kept, and they must be left to the punishment of their torturing consciences. Besides, there is evidently some dreadful mystery enveloping the affair—or else why those mutual accusations, those denials, and those recriminations? But pen your note, dear Isabel —— I now go straight to Sir Edgar Beverley."

All was done as Christian had suggested. The Baronet was only too happy to comply with any request that was made to him by his young friend Christian, or on behalf of Laura's new friend Isabella. A domestic was despatched to Tunbridge; and in the evening he returned, accompanied by Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Vincent's maid.

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CHAPTER LXXVIII.

MAKEPEACE.

THE scene now changes to the mansion of the late Earl of Lascelles—that mansion where a horrible murder had been committed a short time back, and whence Isabella Vincent had fled in consternation and horror, as we have just heard her describing the circumstance to Christian Ashton.

It was evening—and the Countess of Lascelles, dressed in deep mourning, was seated on a sofa in the Red Drawing-room—that very apartment of which Isabella had spoken. She was pale even to deadly whiteness—haggard and careworn: her sable garments and her snowy white cap of widowhood threw out her pallor into all the ghastlier relief. There was the glitter of a wild and almost frenzied uneasiness in her eyes, as if she felt her's to be a position which was no longer tolerable, but yet as if she were utterly bewildered when endeavouring to make up her mind to any particular course of action. Oh, how different did she seem from that gay, beautiful, glittering Countess who but a short time back was revelling in all the delights of illicit love with her paramour Adolphus!

Presently the door opened: but so noiselessly did it swing upon its hinges, that it was no wonder if Ethel and Osmond had heard it not, when a few days previously Isabella entered and stood transfixed on catching the dreadful words that were then exchanged between them. Who was it that entered now? Adolphus himself—the Earl of Lascelles, as he had been called since the late nobleman's murder. And he too was fearfully altered: he looked a dozen years older than he really was—his cheeks were even more sunken and haggard than those of Ethel herself: he walked with a slow and languid step, as if he were enfeebled and borne down by a tremendous weight of care. As he appeared from behind the screen, Ethel gave a slight start: but far stronger was that spasmodic shock as it was experienced inwardly. The young Earl of Lascelles took a chair opposite to her: their looks had only met for an instant, and were then averted with a mutual and simultaneous feeling of immense and indescribable horror.

"How long is this state of things to continue?" asked Adolphus, at the expiration of more than a minute's continued silence, and speaking in a voice that sounded hollow and sepulchral.

"What mean you?" inquired Ethel: and for an instant her eyes flashed loathingly and abhorrently upon him whom she had once adored with so strong and devouring a passion.

"I mean, Ethel," answered the young Earl, "that we are leading a life which is breaking our hearts and hurrying us to the grave—that the domestics of the household will not much longer entertain the belief that it is affliction for the lost one that is devouring us—and that all this is produced by your obstinacy! For if you would but confess, I would pardon you——yes, by heaven I would pardon you, although we should separate the next moment!"

"Coward, thus to persecute a helpless woman!" exclaimed Ethel. "It is for you to confess—then I will pardon you—and as you have said, we will separate on the instant. Do you imagine that even if by thus haunting me like a ghost, you drive me mad, and elicit from me in my frenzy the avowal of a crime which I did *not* commit,—do you imagine, I ask, that if you were thus to succeed in your diabolic purpose, you will deceive that heaven whose eye penetrates into the secret recesses of your heart? Are you so insensate as to suppose that you can virtually and actually shift the burthen of the crime from your own conscience and hurl it upon mine?"

"Enough, Ethel!" exclaimed Adolphus fiercely: "it is I who ought to put all these questions to you. Why do you remain here to haunt me?"

"I will remain here," answered the Countess, "until I shall have compelled you to admit your horrible guilt to me!"

"And I will remain here," rejoined the young Earl, "until I have brought a vile woman to reason!"

"This is abominable!" cried the Countess, her ashy lips quivering with rage. "The world never saw such dastard conduct—such a cruel, bitter persecution!"

"Ah, I may retort the same!" said Adolphus bitterly. "But listen, Ethel! Your conduct is most insensate—it will inevitably lead to suspicion—circumstances will enmesh you—you will be proved the murderess——"

"No—it is you," she ejaculated, "who will be proved the murderer—and you who will suffer accordingly! Think you not that Isabella suspected something when she insisted on leaving the house so suddenly——"

"Yes—she suspected something," interrupted Adolphus; "but it was against yourself that her misgivings rested. The result of your obstinacy, you perceive, has already developed itself: that poor girl has gone mad—there can be no doubt of it—and she has fled from the farm in Kent——"

"Yes: but whatever may happen to her," interjected Ethel, "must be charged at your door. Once—once for all, confess! It is only to me that the confession has to be made—it will never pass my lips: but how different will be the terms on which we shall thereafter stand! You will receive my forgiveness, though everything else will be at an end between us—our minds will recover a certain calm—as much calmness as they can ever hope to experience in this world—we shall separate—and those circumstances which are now calculated to excite suspicion and eventually to fix the crime upon you, will cease and have an end."

"No—they are tending to fix the crime upon you!" retorted the Earl of Lascelles with a savage ferocity. "Those are most cunning and most admirable arguments which you have used; and the use thereof proves how well you can anticipate what was about to be uttered from my lips. Come, Ethel, confess—for heaven's sake confess!"

The Countess made a gesture of scorn and contempt, blended likewise with abhorrence—but said nothing.

"You do not probably know," resumed the young Earl of Lascelles, "how serious matters are growing. There is Makepeace—too well acquainted with all that weakness into which love betrayed you and me,—Makepeace who succoured and who

screened us,—there is this man, I repeat, Ethel, flinging his furtive looks of suspicion upon you——"

"Indeed, Adolphus!" interrupted the Countess, "I was thinking of giving you the same warning, in the hope that it would lead you to put an end at once to this frightful state of existence for us both; for I can assure you that it is upon *you* the suspicious looks of Makepeace are furtively thrown."

"Ethel, you will drive me mad!" exclaimed Adolphus, starting up from his seat. "One word, Ethel——"

"One word, Adolphus!" and the Countess, starting up at the same time, confronted the young nobleman—lately her paramour—now the object of her bitterest aversion.

They gazed upon each other with a strange fixity of look—as if each momentarily expected the eyes of the other to quail and be downcast—as if each wondered that it was not so; and then each withdrawing those regards as if by simultaneous and tacit consent,—Ethel resumed her seat upon the sofa. Adolphus turned upon his heel, and quitted the room with a quicker step than when he had entered it.

He opened the door somewhat abruptly; and he beheld a person gliding away across the landing, as if from the vicinage of that door where he might have been listening. This individual was Makepeace. Adolphus was instantaneously by his side; and clutching him forcibly by the arm, he said in a low hoarse voice, "What were you doing there?"

"I, my lord?" said Makepeace, for an instant assuming a look of most candid innocence: but suddenly changing, with the air of one who did not think it worth while to dissemble, he added in a sort of independent manner, "If your lordship

will give me five or ten minutes, I will explain myself."

The Earl of Lascelles was about to fling the fellow away from him as a chastisement for his insolence: but with a strong effort he subdued his boiling passion, and said, "Follow me."

He led the way towards his own chamber—to reach which an ante-room had to be traversed; and locking the door of that ante-room, the young Earl of Lascelles was tolerably well assured there could be no listeners to whatsoever was about to take place. To convince himself, however, completely upon the point, he looked behind all the draperies in his bedroom; and having done this, he turned towards Makepeace, saying, "And now what is it?"

"Why does your lordship take all these precautions," asked the valet—"locking doors, looking behind curtains——"

"Because," interrupted the Earl of Lascelles—and he spoke with a kind of haughty composure—"something tells me that you are about to address me on a delicate topic."

"What topic, my lord?" asked Makepeace, gazing fixedly upon his master's countenance.

"When I was insensate enough," rejoined the Earl, speaking as it were between his teeth which were nearly close set, "to suffer you to become acquainted with that love which subsisted between myself and the Countess, I little suspected that you would ever think of taking an unworthy advantage of the confidence thus reposed in you."

"And when, my lord, have I done so?" asked Makepeace, who seemed for an instant staggered by the manner in which he was thus addressed.

"You have not done it yet," responded the Earl: "but I am much mistaken if you are not about to do so now. I should like to be so mistaken! But there was something in your manner a few minutes back upon the landing—there is something even in your look at this very moment——"

"Well, my lord," interrupted Makepeace, not merely recovering his effrontery, but evidently becoming more and more inclined to throw off the mask completely—"and what if I think it high time your lordship should do something for me? what if I mean to demand that which you had not the generosity to offer me?"

"Speak your wishes," said the Earl of Lascelles, still with an outward appearance of cold and haughty dignity, whatever he might have inwardly felt.

"Look you, my lord," said Makepeace—and the usually servile, grovelling, bowing menial, who had never before looked as if he had dared say his soul was his own, drew his person upright, thrust his hands into his breeches pockets, and planted himself close in front of the Earl with an air of defiance. "Considering all I have done to serve you when you were Lord Osmond—how I winked at your pranks with the old Earl's wife—how I told lies to screen you—and considering also what I could tell if I chose, about the very circumstances that changed your title from simple Lord Osmond to the grand one of Earl of Lascelles—I think that if your lordship was to write me a cheque for ten thousand pounds, you would only be doing what was fair and proper under the circumstances."

At the commencement of this speech on the part of the insolent valet, the young nobleman experienced the utmost difficulty in preventing himself from striking Makepeace down upon the floor. At the allusion to the circumstances of his amour with the Countess, the blood of Adolphus tingled in every vein, and a crimson flush mantled on his previously pale cheeks. But when Makepeace so darkly and unmistakably hinted at the murder of the old Earl, Adolphus suddenly became pale as death—the blood appeared to stagnate into ice in his veins—and he quivered visibly.

"Ah!" he muttered, "it is as I feared—but I was resolved to ascertain! You have been playing the eavesdropper—you have been listening to-night at the door of the Red Drawing-room?"

"And what if I have?" demanded Makepeace, with dogged brutality of tone and look. "What I heard there, only confirmed my previous suspicions. Yes, my lord—I mean what I say! You had better purchase my secresy: give me ten thousand pounds—and I take myself off, never to trouble you any more."

"Makepeace, hear me!" said the Earl of Lascelles, fearfully excited. "It was not because my love betrayed me into such weakness, that I could have been guilty of so horrible a crime——"

"He who would seduce his father's wife," interrupted Makepeace, "would scarcely hesitate to take that father's life!"

"Ah!" thought Adolphus to himself, "he does not, then, know the terrific secret of my birth!—he does not suspect that Ethel is *not* my mother-in-law, and that the old Earl was *not* my father!"

"Come, my lord, what are you thinking of?" demanded the valet: "your lips move but say nothing. Let us cut all this short. You see that I know everything. Who had better reasons than you to make away with the poor old man just as he was on the very point of sending you abroad?"

"Makepeace, I swear that I am innocent!" exclaimed Adolphus vehemently.

"Your lordship would have some difficulty," returned the valet, with a sneer, "in persuading a jury or in making the House of Lords believe your innocence."

"But you have not overheard me confess guilt!" cried Adolphus. "No!—in all your listenings, you can have heard nothing but denial on my part!"

"But I have heard the Countess accuse your lordship of it a dozen times within the last hour," rejoined Makepeace. "In short, you accused each other; and therefore if I said the word, you would both have to go and pit your averments against one another elsewhere."

The Earl of Lascelles was frightfully convinced of the truth of all this: his pale countenance again became ghastlier still—again too did he tremble visibly, as he thought within himself, "The exposure would be hideous—horrible! and *one* at least would be sure to go to the scaffold!"

"Now, my lord, what is your decision?" asked Makepeace, who saw that the victory was his own.

"If I give you this money," was the Earl of Lascelles' answer, "you must not for a moment think it is a bribe for your silence with respect to a terrible crime of which I am incapable: but it shall be given to you to save the honour of a lady from exposure. You shall have the amount—but

on condition that you henceforth and for ever leave me unmolested!"

"That is a bargain, my lord," replied Makepeace, who knew perfectly well that it rested with his own goodwill and pleasure whether he should adhere to it in future years.

"But," continued the Earl of Lascelles, "two or three days may elapse before I shall be enabled to place the amount in your hands: for as yet, as you may have seen, I have had neither heart nor spirit to take any steps to put myself in possession of my late father's property; and though his undisputed heir,"—and the young nobleman looked hard in the valet's face, as he thus spoke, to assure himself that the terrific secret of his birth was indeed unsuspected—and the result of the survey was at least on this point altogether satisfactory,—"and though my late father's undisputed heir," he continued, "yet still there are certain little legal formalities to be fulfilled. But I will set about them to-morrow; and I repeat in two or three days——"

"There is no hurry for a day or two, my lord," answered Makepeace, "provided the bargain is to be considered as good as settled, and you will not fly off from it."

"I will not," returned Adolphus. "And now leave me. I shall remain here in my own chamber for the rest of the evening. You may tell Walter"—thus alluding to his principal body-servant—"that I shall not require his services to-night."

"Very good, my lord," answered Makepeace, who, now that his object was gained, at once relapsed into that servile civility of tone, look, and manner, which was habitual with him: and bowing low, he issued from the nobleman's presence,—doubtless chuckling inwardly at the apparent success of his scheme of extortion.

As for the Earl of Lascelles himself, it may easily be conceived that he was left in a state of mind scarcely to be envied by even a felon lying under sentence of death in a condemned cell.

Makepeace, on closing the door of the antechamber behind him, heard the key turn again violently in the lock; and he knew therefore that the young nobleman was in a condition of fearful excitement.

"Ah! he will remain there for all the rest of the evening," thought Makepeace to himself: "he will not issue thence till the morning. Well, then, so much the better! It affords me the opportunity to carry out that other project which I had in view."

With these words musingly spoken to himself, Makepeace entered the Red Drawing-room, where the Countess of Lascelles was seated. She did not immediately hear him; and when he passed round the end of the screen into her presence, she thought for a moment that it was Adolphus returning to speak to her. But upon perceiving that it was her late husband's confidential valet, and that he advanced into the room with an air somewhat different from that which he habitually wore—an air that was in a certain respect strange, though she could not exactly define to herself how it was thus singular,—Ethel started, and a feeling seized upon her sending a chill to her heart like a presentiment of evil. He approached nearer to the sofa on which she was half-reclining at the instant he entered—but where, upon perceiving who the individual was, she at once raised herself up to a sitting posture.

"Pardon me, my lady," said Makepeace, "but I wish to have a few words' conversation with you:"—and neither the tone of his voice nor the expression of his countenance was so completely respectful as it was wont to be, though it could not be pronounced downright uncivil.

"A few words' conversation with me?" said the Countess of Lascelles: and though the worst misgiving relative to something wrong smote her heart at the time, she nevertheless asserted by her tone and manner the dignity of her sex and rank, and drew herself up with the air of a well-bred and high-born lady who is offended.

"Yes—I said what I mean," replied Makepeace, who was inspired by his success with the young Earl to be more or less prepared to carry matters with a tolerable high hand towards the Countess. "Your ladyship and I must have a little discourse together——"

"If it be relative to the affairs of the household," interrupted Ethel, now choosing to play the part of not seeming to understand what was addressed to her, "you must speak to his lordship: for as you are aware, I am no longer the mistress here, unless it be upon sufferance."

"What I have to say to your ladyship," exclaimed Makepeace, growing bolder and bolder, or rather displaying more and more hardihood and effrontery, "has nothing to do with household matters, nor his lordship, nor anybody else except your ladyship and me."

Ethel's eyes flashed fire, and the colour went and came in quick transitions upon her countenance. For an instant, however, the thought struck her that Makepeace might be tipsy; and she gazed upon him searchingly and scrutinizingly for a few moments: but though a sinister light did indeed shine in his eyes, it was not that of intoxication—it was the devouring glow of passion and desire. Ethel could not possibly fail to comprehend it: a burning blush suffused her countenance—she quivered with rage, and with a sense of indignity, of outrage, and of insult—to which feelings she however dared not give as full and complete an expression as her tortured feelings prompted. At the same time she could not altogether subdue the violence of her emotions; and she said half angrily and half in remonstrance, "Makepeace, something strange has come over you—you are forgetting yourself—I do not understand this conduct on your part!"

"The explanation will be soon given, my lady," he rejoined; "and I already see by your looks that you are not very far off from understanding it. You need not glance uneasily around—no one will come in—his lordship has just retired for the night—he told me that he had. You and I have got all the discourse to ourselves; and when I tell your ladyship that with a single word I can blow your honour, fame, name, position, safety, and everything else to atoms——"

"Makepeace, what mean you?" ejaculated Ethel, with a strong spasmodic start: and then she nearly sank back, overcome by the weight of those frightful apprehensions which seized upon her.

"I mean this, my lady," responded the valet,

whose hardihood grew greater as he perceived that his intended victim's misgivings increased: "I know of your amour with the young Earl—I mean when he was Lord Osmond——"

The wretched Countess moaned deeply and covered her face with her hands: for she was only too well aware of the fatal truth of the valet's words;—and never did woman experience a more bitter chastisement for a frailty of which she had been guilty, nor more profoundly regret the comparative levity with which at the time she had treated the fact that circumstances had compelled her paramour Adolphus to make a confidant of this man and to invoke his succour in throwing the old Earl off the scent.

"Yes, my lady," continued Makepeace, "I know of your amour with the young nobleman: but *that* is almost nothing in comparison with something else that I also know! There is however no necessity to make fifty words of what may be told in five; and therefore I may as well at once explain to your ladyship that all the time you were speaking with his lordship just now, my ear was fast fixed against the key-hole, and so I lost not a single word."

Again did the Countess moan; for all in an instant did whatsoever had taken place between Adolphus and herself flash back to her memory. But suddenly raising her eyes, she appeared to regain a certain degree of composure—or at least of mental fortitude—as she said, "You heard me say nothing, Makepeace, which justifies you in treating me in a manner so outrageously disrespectful."

"On the contrary," retorted the valet, "I heard his lordship accuse you of a crime——"

"Silence!—enough, enough!" ejaculated Ethel. "What is it that you require? Gold? If so, name the sum——But, Ah! think not for a minute that it is because I am really guilty——No! criminal though I have been in other respects——But, my God! to have thus to speak in the presence of a menial!" said the Countess, suddenly turning aside and murmuring these few last words to herself: "it is dreadful—dreadful!"

"Gold? No—I need not gold—at least not yet from *you*:"—and here Makepeace suddenly lowered his own voice to an under tone: then again speaking aloud, he added, "No, my lady—it is not gold that I want from your hands. Look you! we are here alone together—no one overhears us—and therefore I may as well tell you——"

"What?" ejaculated Ethel, with a half-shriek as she sank back in affright from the bold insolent looks which the valet bent upon her as he leaned partially towards her. "For heaven's sake be quick, and let this scene end!"

"Is is nearly finished," rejoined Makepeace, "so far as I am concerned: it will be your fault if it is prolonged. In one word, then, you are the handsomest of women—and if to-night, when all the house is quiet, you hear a gentle tap at your chamber-door——"

The word "Monster!" came up to the very tip of the Countess of Lascelles' tongue—but she could not give utterance to it: for though she had expected some insolent avowal or overture of this sort, yet nevertheless now when it was made, it struck her as heavy a blow as if it were perfectly unanticipated. She was seized with consternation and dismay; and she sate gazing with wild staring eyes upon the valet.

"Yes—now your ladyship understands my meaning," he went on to say, with the air of one who felt he had only to dictate his own terms in order to obtain them; "and I need not tell your ladyship that everything must be kept secret between you and me. Of course *you* will be silent for your own sake; and your ladyship need not be afraid that before my lord or any of the servants I shall betray what takes place, by any familiarity on my part."

Ethel groaned inwardly: she saw how completely she was in the villain's power: for she thought to herself, "If by opposition or resistance on my part he is driven to a vindictive course, there is at least *one* who will go to the scaffold!"—and this was in the same sense as what the young Earl of Lascelles had himself thought half-an-hour previously.

But all in an instant it flashed to Ethel's mind that if she could only gain a reprieve—if in the desperation of her circumstances she could only secure twenty-four hours' delay—something might turn up—some plan might be hit upon to release herself from the terrible persecutions of this wretch: or at all events she should have time to flee away for ever from the metropolis, or even from England itself.

"I understand you, Makepeace," she said, in a low deep voice: "but all this has come so suddenly upon me—I am so ill—so very ill—that if you would have mercy—if you would only give me a few hours to reflect——Yes, I am sure you will!—you know that a woman, unless utterly depraved, cannot abandon herself to a man all in an instant——"

"She really takes it somewhat better than I thought," said Makepeace to himself: "and perhaps it would be as well——"

"Oh, I see that you will grant my prayer," she exclaimed, clasping her hands entreatingly: "yes, you will grant my prayer! Not another word need pass between us, neither this evening nor during the day to-morrow——But to-morrow night, between eleven and twelve o'clock—when the house is all quiet——And now leave me!" she abruptly added.

Makepeace was somewhat inclined to insist upon the achievement of his hoped-for conquest at the early period he had originally named: but he was in his heart naturally a coward—his craven spirit was not altogether superseded by the hardihood of his villany—and he had already gone as far as at the present time he dared go. He felt that his triumph was ensured for the appointment just given by the Countess; and after a few moments' hesitation, he nodded significantly and issued from the room.

"Good heavens!" thought the miserable Countess to herself, as she heard the door close behind him: "is it come to this?"—and she wrung her hands in despair.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

THE OATHS.

It was about eleven o'clock at night when the Countess of Lascelles issued from her own bed-chamber and advanced into the passage with a taper in her hand. She was completely dressed, just the same as when she had retired from the drawing-room half an hour previously: for she had dispensed with the attendance of her tirewomen on some plea or another. She had made up her mind how to act: she purposed to see the Earl of Lascelles and tell him everything that had occurred. At first it was her intention to put off this proceeding until the morrow: but then she recollected from Makepeace's eavesdropping, how dangerous it was to discourse with Adolphus on particular subjects when the domestics of the establishment were about during the day-time; and moreover she felt that it would be utterly impossible for her to seek her couch until she had unburthened her mind to him who was so recently her paramour.

Pale as death was the Countess of Lascelles as she threaded the passage: the light playing upon her countenance gave it an additional wanness—and with the corpse-like face, and dressed in her sable garb, she looked like some restless visitant from another world.

She tapped gently at the door of the young Earl's suite of apartments: she knew there was no danger of being overheard by any other inmate of the house—for the sleeping-chambers of the domestics were all at a distance—and Isabella Vincent, be it recollected, was not at the mansion. At first Ethel's summons elicited no response: she knocked again—then she heard rapid footsteps approaching through the ante-chamber—and the voice of Adolphus demanded curtly, "Who is there?"

"It is I," responded Ethel: "and it is of vital consequence that we should have a few words together."

There was a dead silence of several moments on the other side of the door, as if Adolphus were deliberating with himself whether he should open it or not: then suddenly Ethel heard a key turn in the lock—the door opened—she passed into the ante-chamber, and found the young Earl still completely dressed: for no more than herself was he as yet able to court repose in bed.

"Ethel, what means this?" he asked, having closed the door after she had entered: and then he surveyed her attentively for several instants. "Surely it is not a revival of love," he added bitterly, "which has brought you hither?"

"A truce to levity!" said the Countess. "Things have come to such a pass that they are driving me to distraction! We will not again enter upon accusation and recrimination——"

"Ah! then you are come to confess?" ejaculated the young Earl: "and I thank God that it is so!"

"Dare you take the name of God thus in vain?" asked Ethel, with a voice and look of solemn reproach. "O Adolphus——"

"Yes," interrupted the Earl. "I dare appeal to my Maker to attest my vow of innocence in respect to that crime."

"Oh, hear me, Almighty God!" said the Countess, slowly sinking upon her knees, and raising her hands upward with an air of most solemn adjuration,—"hear me while I proclaim my innocence of that dreadful deed; and let thy thunderbolt——"

"Ethel, Ethel! for heaven's sake," exclaimed Adolphus, in horror-stricken dismay, "invoke not a chastisement which may perhaps be only too surely hurled down upon your head!"

"Silence! interrupt me not!" responded the Countess. "But listen while I call heaven's thunderbolt to smite me dead at your feet if I am giving utterance to a falsehood!"

"What does this mean? what *can* it mean?" exclaimed the young Earl, in an almost stupified astonishment. "There is an air of sincerity about you—— sincerity too in your words——"

"Yes, sincerity," added the Countess with the same solemn emphasis as before, "because I am speaking the truth! You *feel* it as I *know* it. Look at me, Adolphus! Have I the air of a guilty woman?"—and rising up from her knees as she thus spoke, she regarded him steadily in the face. "But you, O Adolphus! I conjure you——"

"Nay, observe!" he interrupted her; and now his own look, manner, and voice were replete with a solemn sense of awe; "that same vow which you have taken, do I dare repeat:"—and he sank down upon his knees at the same time.

"Adolphus," cried the Countess, "add not perjury——"

"Silence!" he exclaimed, in a tone which made her stop short suddenly: and starting back a pace or two she became transfixed to the spot.

Then Adolphus repeated in solemn averment of his own innocence, that same oath which she had taken in respect to herself: and she heard and looked on in silence. He rose up from his suppliant posture: he gazed upon her with an earnest, steadfast scrutiny: she looked upon him in a similar manner.

"Would you swear that oath upon the Bible?" he at length asked: and still more searching was his gaze, as if to penetrate into the nethermost depths of her soul.

"I could repeat that oath upon the Bible," she answered: and though her countenance continued deadly pale, yet was her look firm—quailing not for a single moment. "But would you?"

"Yes! Behold me!" ejaculated Adolphus: and hastening to a book-shelf he took down a copy of the sacred volume.

"Then let us swear!" said Ethel. "But if the deed lie not between us two——"

"Oh, if it did not," exclaimed Adolphus, quivering with the strength of his emotions,—"if we could only convince each other that it did not ——But, Ah! Ethel, there is *one* test—and, alas! alas! I fear that you could not bring yourself to pass through it!"

"Still suspicious against me?" said the Countess: "and I who, more generous, was beginning to have faith in you and to believe that we had both hitherto been the victims of some horrible mystery—some hideous crime perpetrated by another! But enough! What is this test? There is no ordeal that I will flinch from encountering to con-

vince you of my innocence! But, alas! Adolphus ——"

"Suspicious now in your turn?" he ejaculated: then in a solemn voice, and with a corresponding look, he said, "Would you accompany me, Ethel, to the chamber in which the deed itself was perpetrated? would you stand with me by the side of the couch on which the murdered victim lay—would you place your hand upon the very pillow which was pressed by his head—would you in the other hand grasp the holy volume and then swear——"

"Yes," interrupted Ethel, "I would do all that! But you, Adolphus ——"

"And I likewise!" responded the young Earl. "Truly there must have been some hideous, horrible mistake: for surely, surely such dread perjury——"

"I am incapable of it!" ejaculated Ethel. "Of what need to perjure myself to *you?* Would it not be the most unnecessary of crimes?"

"Yes—and on my part the same!" replied Adolphus: "the most unnecessary of crimes! I know not how it is, but an idea has sprung up in my mind, that we perhaps have been too harsh to each other—each too quick in arriving at a conclusion! But, Oh! if it were so——But, no, no! it is impossible!—the deed must lie between us two—and I know that for myself——"

"And I know likewise for myself," ejaculated Ethel, warmly and impatiently, "that——" but suddenly curbing her returning anger, she added in a solemn tone, "Come, let us do as you have said—let us proceed to the chamber where the terrible deed took place: and, Oh! it is with a light conscience in *that* respect that I shall swear the oath upon the sacred volume!"

With these words the Countess of Lascelles took up the taper which she had brought with her: but as she lifted it from the table somewhat rapidly, it flickered almost to extinction: and Adolphus said, "We must have a better light than this: we must look well in each other's countenance. Proceed, Ethel: I will join you in a moment."

He hastened into his bed-chamber, and returned with a lamp which threw forth a strong glare. In silence they proceeded from the ante-room: still in silence too, and with noiseless steps like stealthily walking ghosts, they passed along the passage—and in a minute reached the door of the dressing-room where the late Earl had been wont to perform his somewhat elaborate toilet under the auspices of Makepeace. As if smitten with the same feeling and at the same moment, the young Earl and the Countess flung their looks upon each other: the countenance of each was pale, but full of firm and solemn resolve. They spoke not a word. Adolphus opened the door of the dressing-room, and with the habitual courtesy which in respect to a female prevails with every well-bred man under any circumstances, he stood aside to suffer Ethel to enter first. Without the slightest hesitation she crossed the threshhold: she lingered not in the dressing-room for Adolphus to come close up with her as she opened the door of communication with the bed-chamber—that chamber which had proved the scene of the terrific tragedy!

She entered the chamber—Adolphus quickly followed—and once more did they exchange rapid looks, as if each were curious, or we should rather say *anxious* to ascertain what demeanour was now borne by the other. And both countenances were still expressive of firmness, mingled with a solemn awe.

The young Earl of Lascelles deposited the lamp upon a table; and holding the bible in one hand, he advanced towards the bed, Ethel keeping close by his side.

"Suffer me to take the oath first," said the Countess; "and if for an instant," she added, "I may have appeared to shudder as I thus approach this couch, it was not in trepidation on account of the oath that I am about to take—but through horrified remembrance of the spectacle which I beheld in this apartment the last time that I was here."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader that all traces of the hideous tragedy had been cleansed or removed away from the chamber, and that no one unless previously acquainted with the fact, could for an instant have suspected that any such foul crime had been perpetrated there.

"And I too shuddered for an instant," said Adolphus, "and for the same reason! Can you depict to yourself, Ethel, the whole of that dread spectacle? can you lay your hand upon the satin coverlid of this couch, and fancy within yourself that it is upon the cold corpse of the deceased you are placing that hand as if that corpse were indeed here still? And if such be the impression under which, assisted by your imagination, you are now standing here—then take this book, kiss it, and swear that you are innocent of your late husband's death!"

Unhesitatingly did the Countess of Lascelles receive the book in one hand, while she placed the other upon the pillow of the bed; and when Adolphus had dictated to her an oath couched in terms alike the most solemn and the most terrible—when too in a firm voice she had repeated word for word all that he thus dictated—she kissed the sacred volume—adding in the same tone of solemn resolute confidence, "I swear!"

When this was done, Adolphus gazed upon her for a few moments with the most searching scrutiny—a scrutiny from which she neither quailed nor shrank, but which she endured with the air of one who was indeed innocent of a foul crime and who had no cause to dread the fathoming of the inmost recesses of her heart—at least not upon *that* score. The Earl received back the book from her hand, and made a sign for her to commence the administration of the oath unto himself. She repeated precisely the same formula as that which he had dictated to her; and he, with an equal air of sincerity—with the same outward appearance of confidence—with the same absence of any trace of a guilty conscience's internal whispering—pressed the book to his lips and said, "I swear!"

Then the Countess of Lascelles gazed upon him with as deep and earnest a scrutiny as that which she herself had ere now undergone; and he bore it as unflinchingly and as firmly.

"Yes, Adolphus," she said, "you are innocent!"

"And you, Ethel," he replied, "you also are innocent!"

But did their former love spring up again in their

hearts, now that the hideous nightmare of suspicion was lifted also from the soul of each?—did they fly into each other's arms? were their hands instantaneously clasped? Not so. It is true that they now beheld each other in a different light: but that love of their's—once so strong—so impassioned, and so tender—had received a shock from which recovery was impossible. A blight had fallen upon it, as upon the most beauteous flower which never again must raise its drooping head from beneath that withering influence. And they gazed upon each other with looks of embarrassment and constraint: yet the same feeling was in both hearts alike—for each knew that though suspicion was set at rest for ever, yet that the wide gulf which had opened between them could never be completely bridged—that love was done for them—and that even friendship's self would lack the warmth which might enable them to go hand-in-hand with cheerfulness through the world thenceforth.

All of a sudden they heard a sound as if the outer door of the dressing-room was opening. Again were their glances quickly turned upon one another: but no superstitious fear was expressed in their looks;—and then their eyes were rapidly flung in the direction of the chamber-door itself; for footsteps were traversing the dressing-room. This last-mentioned door was opened slowly; and a man appeared upon the threshold. That man was Makepeace.

He was only half dressed: his countenance was ghastly pale—his features were rigid: his eyes, wide open, seemed to be staring upon vacancy, as if the images reflected in them remained only upon the retina and were carried not in unto the brain. Yes—it was indeed evident that those eyes imparted to the man himself no more sense of the objects which were imaged there, than the polished mirror could know of the things which its surface reflected. Adolphus and Ethel stood back in silent horror: for it was indeed with a feeling of horror they were now smitten, as the truth burst upon them. Makepeace was visiting that chamber of the tragedy in a state of somnambulism!

The valet advanced towards the bed,—taking not the slightest notice of Adolphus or the Countess, although if his eyes had possessed the active sense of vision as well as the mere inert faculty, he could not have failed to see them. He bore no light in his hand: yet he was startled not by the glare of the lamp that was burning upon the table. Towards the bed he went, as we have just said: he extended his arms across it—he gesticulated in a strange manner for a few moments—his features, relaxing from their rigidity, became violently convulsed—his eyes rolled in their sockets, as if with the intense horror of the feelings that now inspired him. Adolphus and Ethel remained motionless and silent—standing aside, but close together—gazing on this dread spectacle; and for an instant they thought that Makepeace beheld them—recognised them—and was about to address them, as his looks seemed to settle upon them both. But his eyes, having now suddenly ceased to roll, glanced only with a glassy and inanimate light—not as if the mind itself, with the sense peculiar to those orbs, were shining through them. Then the man slowly turned away; and still wrapped in a profound slumber—still iron-bound by the influence of somnambulism—still proceeding mechanically as if a mere walking automaton—he took his departure from the chamber, shutting the door behind him; and a few moments afterwards Adolphus and Ethel heard the outer door—namely, that of the dressing-room—likewise close.

"Oh, we have indeed been most unjust towards each other!" cried Adolphus, turning his looks upon the Countess. "For that man——"

"Yes—we have been most unjust!" replied Ethel: "for the horrible mystery is now cleared up—and that man is the murderer of his master!"

"Come, let us leave this chamber," said the young Earl; "and thankful ought we to be to Providence for having brought us hither on this occasion, to behold what we have just seen. It is a mercy which we perhaps little deserved at the hands of heaven!"

"And in remembrance thereof," exclaimed the Countess fervidly, "all the remainder of my life shall be so spent as to prove an atonement for the past!"

They issued forth together—and returned to the ante-chamber where Ethel had previously sought Adolphus.

"Our conversation took such a turn," said the Countess, "almost immediately after I joined you here just now, "that I totally lost sight of the real object for which I came. Ah! little, little did I foresee that events were to flow into such a channel as to lead to the mutual conviction of each others innocence! I came just now to tell you, Adolphus, that the villain Makepeace,—he whom we have now discovered, beyond the possibility of doubt, to be the assassin of the master who was at least so good and kind to him—he whose guilty conscience conducts him, amidst the restless slumbers of the night, to the scene of his foul crime——"

"What more has this man done?" asked the young Earl. "I see that there is something hanging heavy upon your mind, Ethel—or rather provoking your indignant sense of sore outrage? And I too am smarting under the recollection of the miscreant's conduct to me ere now——"

"He sought me in the drawing-room," responded Ethel, "some little while after you had left me—he made insolent advances—I felt that I was in his power—he threatened—and, O Adolphus! though I knew myself to be innocent, yet I dreaded lest if that man were to tell his tale, *you* would go to the scaffold——"

"By heaven, Ethel!" interrupted the Earl with impassioned vehemence, "it was the same that I said to myself when I submitted to the extortionate demand he made upon me? For I dreaded lest *you*, Ethel, should be dragged ignominiously before a tribunal, and from a tribunal to the scaffold!"

The young nobleman and the Countess now related to each other everything that had respectively taken place with themselves in reference to Makepeace; and hence it appeared that whereas on the one hand Adolphus had taken time for the payment of the money, so on the other hand had Ethel obtained a reprieve—though a brief one—in respect to the surrender of herself to the embraces of Makepeace.

"The circumstances which have this night transpired," said Adolphus, "are not merely accidental—they have been ordained by heaven to place us on the right track for the discovery and punishment of the murderer. For our own guilt, Ethel, towards that deceased old man, we have indeed been chastised: the horrible state of suspicion in which we have existed since his death, has proved a punishment ample enough, let us hope, to satisfy heaven's sternest sense of justice. And now let us separate. Retire you to your chamber: perhaps you may repose more peaceably for the rest of this night than you have hitherto done——and I shall retire to rest in fullest confidence that heaven will not leave unfinished the work which it has just commenced."

"What course do you purpose to adopt?" asked Ethel: "for remember, Adolphus, that as yet there is but slight evidence to satisfy the world of this man's guilt, though with ourselves it is placed beyond the possibility of doubt."

"I can give you no decisive answer for the present," responded the young Earl. "It is a subject which must be deliberated upon, and which likewise depends upon circumstances which evidently are not altogether in our own hands, but under the guidance of that heaven which has thus so strangely but so mercifully placed us on the right track. And now good night, Ethel."

"Good night, Adolphus:"—and without a hand being shaken between them—but still with a far different feeling towards each other from that which they had entertained until within this hour—they separated.

On the following day, soon after breakfast, a letter was received from Mrs. Gardiner,—to the effect that favourable tidings had been obtained relative to Miss Vincent, who was quite safe and well: but she (Mrs. Gardiner) had only a moment's time to pen this hasty announcement for the satisfaction of the Earl and of the Countess, inasmuch as she was just on the point of setting off to rejoin Miss Vincent at Ramsgate. The housekeeper concluded by promising to write further particulars on the following day, unless she should find on her arrival at Verner House—which was her destination—that Miss Vincent herself had written complete details to the Earl and her ladyship.

"But Isabella has *not* written to us," said Adolphus; "and I am tortured with the idea that she suspects something dreadful on our part. It is for you to write to her, Ethel! Write confidentially to her—tell her that providential circumstances have afforded us a clue to the discovery of the murderer of her uncle—hesitate not to mention the name of Makepeace—for the sooner Isabella's mind is disabused of any horrible suspicion against either you or me—or perhaps both of us—the better!"

"I will not fail to write," answered the Countess. "And you, Adolphus—what course have you decided upon?"

"I am now going to consult an attorney, to whom I shall communicate everything," Adolphus replied; "and I know that his counsel will be given in a friendly as well as prudential spirit."

Makepeace—utterly unaware of the fact of his somnambulism—utterly unsuspicious therefore of the storm that was gathering above his head, and threatening to turn the tables completely against himself—heard with satisfaction the Earl's order for the carriage to be gotten in immediate readiness: for the villanous valet thought that the young nobleman was about to go and investigate his financial affairs for the purpose of providing the sum of ten thousand pounds according to the arrangement already made.

Adolphus remained absent for several hours, during which Ethel experienced some degree of anxiety: for she felt the necessity of the adoption of speedy measures in order to bring the crime completely home to Makepeace, and thus extricate herself from the power which the villain might otherwise still continue to wield with regard to her. It was between four and five in the afternoon when Adolphus returned to the mansion; and he was accompanied by his solicitor, Mr. Slater,—who, it was intimated to the domestics, would remain to dinner. Adolphus found an opportunity of speaking a few words to Ethel,—conveying a brief outline of the plan which was to be adopted under existing circumstances; and then retiring to his own chamber for the purpose of changing his toilet, he desired his valet to bid Makepeace attend upon him at once.

"I find," said the young Earl, when Makepeace entered into his presence—and it was with no small difficulty that Adolphus could keep a mask upon his countenance to conceal all that he inwardly felt in respect to the murderer,—"I find that by devoting a few hours' attention to my pecuniary affairs, I shall be enabled the first thing to-morrow morning, to dispose of the sum which you require. I have no doubt you are as ready and willing as I myself am that this business should be settled with the least possible delay. Mr. Slater has brought all his papers with him; and after dinner I purpose to go over them with him. In any case you may fully understand that early to-morrow morning, immediately after breakfast, you will receive the sum which you have demanded of me; and you will therefore at the same time fulfil your part of the compact by leaving the mansion the instant you have the money in your possession."

"It shall be so, my lord," responded Makepeace, inwardly chuckling at the idea that everything was going on so favourably to his own mercenary views.

On retiring from the presence of the young nobleman, Makepeace proceeded to ascertain where the Countess was, in order that he might remind her of the appointment for the coming night, as he supposed it to be the last one which he would have to pass within those walls, and he was resolved that Ethel should not escape from becoming the victim of his passion, if indeed it was in his power by threats and coercion to hold her to her agreement. Makepeace discovered that as it still wanted a good hour to dinner-time, Mr. Slater had proceeded to the library, where he had covered the table with deeds and documents, in the midst of which he seemed to be buried—while on the other hand the Countess was alone in the drawing-room. Thither Makepeace accordingly proceeded; and accosting Ethel, he said, "My lady, remember your promise for to-night!"

"It is impossible that it can be kept," answered the Countess: and admirably well playing her part, she said, "Now do not bend those angry

looks upon me. I am not the mistress of my own actions. The Earl has suddenly taken it into his head to have Mr. Slater here to settle all financial matters: for his lordship will leave for the Continent to-morrow."

"Ah indeed! for the Continent?" ejaculated the valet: and then he muttered to himself, "This, then, accounts for the abruptness with which he is resolved to settle his affairs——But why," he asked of Ethel, "does Mr. Slater's presence here make any difference——"

"Because," replied the Countess, "my signature is required to certain deeds relative to the property which devolves upon myself, my jointure, and so forth; and I must sit up to-night to give that signature. Mr. Slater has intimated to me, with an expression of concern for the trouble thus caused, that it may be one or two o'clock in the morning before the business will be terminated."

Not for a single instant did Makepeace suspect the truth of all these statements: indeed they seemed perfectly natural—and Ethel delivered herself of them with an appearance of the utmost sincerity. The valet reflected for a few moments: he thought to himself that it would be supremely ridiculous for him to loosen his hold upon the Countess; and as he had all along intended to render her his victim in more ways than one, he was well pleased to learn that the Earl was going abroad, as he flattered himself that it would leave the Countess all the more completely defenceless and at his mercy.

"Well, my lady!" he said, "there appears to be no help for it to-night: but if the Earl does really depart to-morrow, you may expect me to pay you a visit at about eleven to-morrow night——for which purpose you can leave unlocked the window of that ground-floor room you used latterly to occupy in the old Earl's time: and I shall have no difficulty in finding my way to where you will re-

ceive me with open arms. Or, what will be better still, you can shift your quarters back to that room and save me a world of trouble. Take care, my lady, that you follow my injunctions and do exactly as I bid: or else——"

The villanous valet threw a look of dark and menacing significancy upon the Countess, who had some difficulty in so far subduing the sense of loathing and abhorrence which she felt towards that man, as to be enabled to give him a calm response in accordance with all he demanded at her hands; and he issued from the room. Between this time and the dinner-hour Adolphus and the Countess had no opportunity of exchanging a word in private together. When the dinner was over, Mr. Slater and Adolphus adjourned to the library, where they deliberated upon the plan which they had in view for the complete detection of Makepeace: for it is scarcely necessary to inform the reader that the tale of so much important business being in hand that would extend deep into the night, was a mere pretext, having two purposes to serve—the first to prevent Makepeace from suspiciously regarding the lawyer's presence at the mansion; and the second to afford Ethel an excuse for breaking her appointment with that same infamous person.

The twilight was deepening into the shades of night, when Adolphus issued from the library, and sought the grounds for the purpose of cooling his brain, which was fevered and excited by the incidents that were now in progress. He had not been in the garden many minutes before he encountered Ethel: for she had come forth to walk for the very same purpose. She now told Adolphus all that had taken place between herself and Makepeace during the hour which preceded dinner: for though Mr. Slater had been made acquainted with every detail of the valet's insolent hopes and intentions, yet the topic was too delicate a one for the Countess to touch upon in that gentleman's presence.

"Everything progresses well," said Adolphus: "Makepeace is entirely off his guard—or rather he is lulled into the utmost security. But, Ah! what sound was that?"

"Hush!" said Ethel, in a low voice. "Let us listen."

They stopped short; and it appeared to them as if they heard the noise of some one digging up the earth at a little distance. This noise was so low as to render them still uncertain whether they rightly interpreted its cause: but as every incident now appeared to them to be invested with an importance bearing upon their own circumstances, they resolved to ascertain what these sounds could mean. Noiselessly they advanced over the grass-plat in the direction of the spot whence those sounds appeared to come,—until they both fancied that they beheld something white moving behind a clump of evergreens. Nearer still did they advance,—their footsteps unheard upon the soft grass, and both threading their way amongst the shrubs and the parterres of flowers with so much caution as not to ruffle a single leaf,—until they were near enough to see what was going on, without themselves being seen. A man with his coat and waistcoat off, was digging in that spot, which was the remotest corner of the grounds, and also the most densely embowered in trees. It was his shirt which had shone white through the foliage and amidst the deepening obscurity of the evening. He was working hard, as if the task he had in hand must be speedily accomplished: he was working too with the fullest sense of security and in confidence of remaining undisturbed at that hour when all the domestics were in the servants' hall, and when he fancied the Earl, the Countess, and Mr. Slater to be deep in the midst of deeds and parchments in the library. For this man was Makepeace.

Adolphus and Ethel were at once smitten with the conviction that this was some new phase which must develope itself in the growing chain of evidence against the murderer of the old Earl; and in breathless suspense they continued gazing upon his proceedings, they themselves taking care to continue unseen. They had not tarried many minutes on the spot before they perceived Makepeace stoop down; and from the hole which he had digged, he drew forth an object which appeared to be a stone jar, about a foot and a half high and of a proportionate width. At the same instant there was a low but still plainly audible chink of gold coins within the jar, or vase, as Makepeace deposited it upon the ground. He then proceeded to shovel back the earth with all possible despatch: Adolphus touched Ethel as a signal that they must retire; and they accordingly retreated as cautiously and as noiselessly as they had advanced towards that spot.

Re-entering the mansion, they hastened to the library to inform Mr. Slater of all that they had just seen; and he was as much struck as themselves by the importance of the incident. That the vase contained the golden temptation for which the crime had been perpetrated, there could be scarcely any doubt; and that the guilty valet was now disinterring his treasure in order that he might convey it to his own room and consign it to his trunk in readiness for his departure on the following morning, was equally clear. The web of circumstantial evidence was visibly and rapidly closing in around the murderer.

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE MURDERER.

A LITTLE before ten on this same night of which we are writing, Adolphus gave orders for his travelling-carriage to be in readiness at nine o'clock in the morning; and at the same time he intimated that the domestics might retire to bed at their usual hour, no one being needed to sit up for himself, the Countess, or Mr. Slater, as they had business to transact which would possibly keep them in the library far into the night.

By eleven o'clock the mansion was silent—the lights were extinguished in all the chambers of the domestics, who had retired about half an hour previously. Adolphus now issued from the library, carrying a light in his hand, and followed by Mr. Slater. They ascended the private staircase, and reached the passage whence opened the suite of apartments occupied by the late Earl. Traversing the dressing-room, they passed into the bed-chamber: and there Adolphus, having deposited

the light upon the toilet-table, left the solicitor by himself. The young Earl then rejoined the Countess of Lascelles in the library.

We may as well observe that Mr. Slater was a man of about forty years of age—intelligent and strong-minded—and by no means prone to superstitious fears. He had therefore unhesitatingly volunteered to become the temporary occupant of the chamber where the horrible murder was committed, in the hope that the proceeding might have a particular issue.

The attorney, when left to himself, merely threw off his coat and waistcoat, and lay down beneath the coverlid. As the reader may very well suppose, he had no inclination for sleep, inasmuch as he had a special task to perform. He therefore lay broad awake, anxiously awaiting the first sound that might indicate the occurrence of that which was expected.

About three-quarters of an hour thus elapsed, when Mr. Slater heard the outer door—namely, that of the dressing-room—opening; and in a few moments the chamber-door itself was affording ingress to some one. The light still burnt upon the toilet-table; and the somnambulist Makepeace—half-dressed, as on the preceding night—with his features rigid, and his eyes fixed as if in a vague glassy stare—approached the couch. Mr. Slater lay perfectly still, awaiting what would happen. Makepeace bent partially over the bed; and extending his hands, appeared to be feeling for a form that might be sleeping there. His right hand gently touched the lawyer's throat; and the somnambulist drew that hand rapidly away, with the horribly faithful imitation of the manner in which he had no doubt drawn the murderous weapon across the throat of the old nobleman.

"Murderer!" ejaculated Mr. Slater: and springing up, he forcibly grasped the arms of the valet.

It would be impossible to describe the perfect agony of terror—the wildering consternation of horror, which seized upon the guilty wretch as he was thus startled from his sleep, and as his brain was smitten with all the harrowing ideas of detection in the crime which he had been in fancy re-enacting.

"Murderer! confess!" exclaimed the lawyer, not leaving Makepeace a moment to collect his ideas or to recover from the fearful shock which he had just sustained.

"I will, I will!" he piteously moaned. "Forgive me, my lord—I meant to do it——I am very wicked——"

And then, all in an instant, recognising the attorney, Makepeace gave vent to a wild cry of terror and anguish; and sinking upon his knees, he poured forth a perfect volley of ejaculations and entreaties for mercy.

Mr. Slater rang the bell violently; and Adolphus, who had been anxiously expecting this summons, was the first to answer it. Several of the male domestics, springing from their beds, and huddling on a few clothes, sped in the same direction: for the solicitor, with one hand firmly clutching the arm of Makepeace, with the other hand continued tugging at the bell even after the young Earl of Lascelles had entered the bed-chamber. And the sound of this bell was heard likewise by Ethel, to whom the intelligence was thereby conveyed that the detection of Makepeace was complete.

When Adolphus rushed into the chamber, the miserable murderer covered his face with his hands, groaning and sobbing audibly.

"He has confessed! he has confessed!" shouted Slater, who was all the while pulling at the bell. "Let us raise the entire household!—let every one know that the assassin is discovered!"

"Mercy! mercy!" groaned Makepeace,—as if it were possible that he would be allowed to escape, which was the only mercy that could be afforded by those who had him in their custody.

"He has confessed the crime!" reiterated Slater: "heaven itself has at length brought it home to him! Wretched being, did you not know—did you not suspect that you walked in your sleep?"

"No! no!" moaned the miserable man, evidently under the influence of the most appalling horror and consternation.

"Had you no idea," continued the lawyer, with rapid and excited utterance, "that you thus wandered about—that an invisible but irresistible hand guided you to the scene of your foul iniquity?"

"My God, no!" groaned Makepeace, quivering with the indescribable horror of his feelings.

"Blaspheme not, wretch!" ejaculated Slater: "invoke not the sacred name of the Almighty, miscreant that you are! Had you no idea that——"

Several of the male domestics—who, as we have already stated, were roused from their beds—now entered the room; and the scene which burst upon them was eloquently expressive of the truth. Makepeace was still upon his knees,—his eyes glaring in wild horror: Slater still retained a hold upon him: Adolphus, with arms folded, was leaning against the bedpost, gazing upon the murderer with looks of deepest loathing and aversion. The fact that such a scene as this should occur in the very chamber where the foul tragedy had been perpetrated, was sufficient to strike the entering domestics with a full idea of its horrible significancy.

"He has confessed the crime!" reiterated Mr. Slater, who had now desisted from pulling at the bell; "and he will not dare deny it! But if he did, of what use? Look at his countenance now!—Murder's very name is written in blood upon it!"

The domestics fell shudderingly back a pace or two: for there was something fearful indeed in the thought of being in the presence of the wretch who had committed so terrible a crime. It was the same sensation as if they had suddenly found themselves approaching near a huge coiled-up reptile, to touch the slimy folds of which would have been to send a strong tremor quivering throughout their entire forms. And no pen can describe the mingled horror and anguish—the wild internal agony that was fast asserting its empire over the previous influence of consternation and dismay,—that *now* held possession of the murderer.

"Had you no idea," proceeded Slater,—who, cool though he naturally were, and calm as he had at first been when taking up his quarters in that room, was now considerably excited,—"had you no idea that the slumbers of such a wretch as you

could not possibly be tranquil, and that you yourself ought to have mistrusted them lest they should prove the very season and means of leading you into circumstances proper for your detection? Would you believe it?" cried the solicitor, glancing round upon those present: "he came stealthily up to the bed, just as he no doubt advanced when about to accomplish his horrible deed——"

"And as he advanced thither last night!" interjected Adolphus mechanically, at the same time shuddering at the reminiscence itself, as well as at all the associations which it conjured up in his mind.

"Ah! last night?" muttered Makepeace, catching at the young Earl's words, and thereby recalled, as it were, to a sense of all the recent past as well as of the frightful present;—and then he all in a moment comprehended how it was that measures had been so promptly taken to turn the tables against him.

"What did he say?" exclaimed Mr. Slater, who did not catch the murderer's words: then, without waiting for any one to give him a response—and still labouring under a strong excitement, from the effect of the scene which had just occurred, and which he was now about to describe—he went on to say, "Yes, he stole up to the bed—he felt about as if to ascertain exactly where I was lying—he drew his hand across my throat——"

Groans of horror burst forth from the domestics previously assembled, and from the lips of others who were now entering the room. Makepeace himself groaned; and not for an instant did he dare deny all that had been said.

"Ah! now I bethink me," ejaculated Mr. Slater, "the crock—the jar——"

"Yes—the golden temptation," said Adolphus, "for which the deed was perpetrated!"

Makepeace gazed with a renewed bewilderment of consternation upon the solicitor and the young Earl. Not that this new discovery struck him as making his case one atom worse than it was before: but the wretched man was surprised to find the various evidences of his guilt thus magically transpiring as it were—accumulating upon him—striking him blow upon blow.

"Keep charge of him—keep charge of him!" exclaimed Mr. Slater. "You, my lord, will remain here to watch over him——Or what is better still, convey him to some place of security until the police can be fetched! Let some one run to the nearest station-house!—and let a couple of you accompany me to the wretch's chamber! I know it not," added the lawyer to the two foremost domestics who volunteered to go with him: "you must lead the way."

The three quitted the room accordingly: Adolphus remained with some six or seven others, keeping guard upon Makepeace; while one of the footmen, who happened to be completely dressed, hastened off to procure the succour of the police. Until this moment Makepeace had remained upon his knees: for it must be comprehended that what it has taken us some time to relate, in reality occupied but a few minutes in its dramatic action. The instant, however, the lawyer and those domestics had quitted the chamber, Makepeace rose up, and signalled his wish to have a few words with the young Earl of Lascelles.

"Whatsoever you have to say, must be said aloud," observed Adolphus, "in the presence of these witnesses:"—and though he spoke with accents of stern severity, yet he inwardly trembled lest his past amour with Ethel should be revealed and her honour ruined beyond redemption.

"Your lordship had better suffer me to speak to you in private," said Makepeace, gradually recovering somewhat of his presence of mind, if not a certain hardihood, with the consciousness that though he were a reptile soon to be trampled to death under the heel of human justice, he had still the sting in his head and his envenomed tongue could inflict no insignificant wound.

For an instant Adolphus was irresolute how to act—but only for an instant. A second thought showed him that no matter what the consequences might be—however fatal to the honour of Ethel, and however damnatory of his own reputation, inasmuch as he passed before the world as the son of the late Earl, and consequently as the son-in-law of her with whom he might now perhaps be accused of having intrigued,—yet notwithstanding all these considerations, he knew, we say, that he dared not appear to have any secrets with a murderer—much less to be thought capable of making terms with such a wretch.

"I will grant you no private audience," he said in resolute accents.

"Your lordship can step aside with me into one corner," answered Makepeace, whose keen eye had caught that temporary indecision on the young nobleman's part: "we can whisper together—or these men can withdraw into the dressing-room for a few minutes——"

"And leave his lordship alone with *you?*" ejaculated several voices, accompanied by looks of horror and abhorrence. "No, no!—you would kill him as you did his poor old father!"

"His lordship knows," said Makepeace, white as a sheet at the hideous taunt, "whether it be more conducive to his interest to listen to me in private or to compel me to speak out."

This invitation for a secret audience, so unmistakeably given, accompanied too with a sort of threat, more than ever compelled Adolphus to take a resolute stand, despite all consequences: and he said firmly, "I remain here to keep guard over you—but not to listen to aught that you may have to communicate. Wretched man! would you not do better to show contrition—to think only of your own awful predicament——"

"Enough of this!" interrupted Makepeace, with increasing hardihood. "I see that it is all over with me, and I must swing for it—or else ——But no matter! My business with life is pretty nearly done—I must die—and *that* speedily too: but I will not perish unavenged! My lord, here, in the presence of your domestics——"

"Silence, villain!" ejaculated Adolphus, now fearfully excited—so that the servants gazed upon him in mingled wonder and suspicion.

"You cannot seal my lips," said Makepeace: "and everything shall now come out. You know that you intrigued with your own mother-in-law!"

Adolphus staggered back, his countenance ghastly white: and the domestics present were naturally enough smitten with the conviction of their master's guilt of the crime just imputed to him.

"Yes, you were the lover of your own father's wife!" continued Makepeace; "and now every one may understand, if they did not comprehend it before, why the Countess occupied a separate room so long—and that ground-floor room too!"

Adolphus groaned audibly: he could not possibly deny the accusation levelled against him: it was true that he might palliate it by proclaiming the secret of his birth—but this he dared not do: it would have been equivalent to the laying down of his titles and the abandonment of his riches all in an instant! The domestics were convinced of the truth of what Makepeace had just said, murderer though he were—for the ghastly looks, the quivering form, and the horrified appearance of the young Earl, bore fullest corroboration of the tale. And then, too, the servants quickly called to mind countless little circumstances which had never before made any particular impression upon them, but which now all combined as damning evidence against their master.

"There!" said Makepeace, as if in horrible exultation at the exposure he had made, "it is all out now—and though I may die on the gallows, yet *you*, my lord, who have cheated me out of my ten thousand pounds—and your beautiful mother-in-law, who cheated me out of her favours—are hopelessly ruined before the world!"

At this instant the lawyer re-appeared, followed by the two servants who had accompanied him, and one of whom carried a stone jar, whence came the chinking sound of gold.

"It was in his room—carefully packed in his box!" exclaimed the attorney. "We forced the box, and we found it!"

"There is no use in denying the whole truth now," said Makepeace; "and if others would only be just as candid, he added, flinging a look of diabolical malignity upon Adolphus, "it would be seen that murder and robbery are not the only crimes that have been committed under this roof!"

"Wretch!" exclaimed Slater with indignation; "think you that for a moment you will mend your own position——But here are the police!"

And it was so. A sergeant and a couple of constables made their appearance, accompanied by the domestic who had been to fetch them; and Makepeace was consigned to their custody. That portion of his apparel in which he was deficient—he having been only half-dressed during his somnambulism—was fetched from his chamber; and for a moment, when the handcuffs were put upon him, he winced and turned more ghastly pale than before: but quickly recovering himself, he re-assumed a bold insolent hardihood, and again vociferated forth the tale of the young nobleman's amour with the Countess. Those who had not previously heard it from his lips, were amazed and shocked; the Earl turned aside, groaning with the horror of his anguished, outraged, harrowing feelings; while Makepeace was borne off in the custody of the police-constables.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE CONFESSION.

MAKEPEACE was alone in a cell at the station-house to which he had been conducted. A profound darkness entombed him; and though the night was a warm one yet did he feel cold to the very marrow of his bones. The handcuffs were upon his wrists—his person had been rigorously searched—every incident and every idea tended to make him now frightfully aware of his awful position. That temporary hardihood which had taken possession of the man when he so cruelly avenged himself against Adolphus and the Countess, had now altogether forsaken him; and he felt profoundly dejected—so deeply, deeply desponding, that the very tears traced each other down his cheeks.

His imagination grew fevered; and from the midst of the darkness of the cell, a form gradually seemed to stand forth,—a gore-stained ghastly shape, slowly becoming plainer and plainer until to his excited imagination it seemed as if his old master's distorted countenance was gazing upon him. At first the wretch looked and looked while horror froze his veins: but at length, unable any longer to endure the presence of the spectre which his fevered fancy had conjured up, he shrieked aloud in his mental agony. The massive bolt of the door was drawn back—the bull's-eye light of a lantern flashed in unto the cell—and a constable asked, "What is the matter?"

"For heaven's sake, do not leave me alone!" exclaimed Makepeace: "or give me a light—— this darkness is terrible! But stay!—send for Mr. Slater—send for him at once! I would speak to him—and then perhaps my mind will be easier!"

"Yes—we will send for him," responded the constable. "I will leave you this light for a minute, while I despatch some one to the house; and in the meantime, if you wish it, I will remain with you."

The constable acted as he had said: a message was despatched to the mansion to Mr. Slater, and though this gentleman had retired to rest,—yet on hearing what was required of him, he immediately rose, hastily apparelled himself, and accompanied the messenger to the station-house. There he was at once introduced to the murderer's cell; and the constable who in the meanwhile had remained with the criminal, asked whether he should retire, or whether he should still continue there?

"Leave us alone together," said Makepeace, whose voice now sounded awfully hollow to the attorney's ears.

"One moment!" said the latter. "From the nature of the message just delivered to me, I conclude, Makepeace, that you purpose to volunteer a full and complete confession of your crime, with all its details. Is it so?"

"It is," was the sepulchrally uttered response.

"You must have a motive for making this confession," continued Mr. Slater. "Is it that at length smitten with remorse, you seek to offer the last and only atonement—poor indeed though it be—which man in such circumstances can make? Or is it that there are some secrets fitted for my ear alone?"

"There is no secret, sir," replied the murderer, "beyond that which relates to the circumstances of the dreadful deed itself."

"In this case," continued the lawyer, "you will have no objection for the confession to be taken down in writing?"

"None," was the murderer's reply: and his voice still sounded as hollow as an echo awakened in the deep gloom of some old cathedral crypt.

"It were better," proceeded the attorney, "that your confession should be made to the ears of two persons. You are sincere in your desire to make a clear breast of it at once—and therefore you cannot object——"

"No, sir," interrupted Makepeace, profoundly dejected; "I leave myself in your hands. Though I have already avowed my guilt, yet until I shall have explained it in all its details, it seems to constitute a secret that sits upon my heart like a weight of lead!"

"Procure writing-materials," said Mr. Slater to the constable. "Return with them, that you may act as a witness of the confession which this remorse-stricken being is about to make."

The constable withdrew; and during his temporary absence, a profound silence reigned in the cell—the eyes of Makepeace being bent downward, and the light of the lanthorn left by the officer, playing with a ghastly effect upon his pallid, haggard countenance, which wore an air of the deepest dejection. The constable returned; and Mr. Slater arranged the writing-materials in a manner as convenient as the circumstances of the cell would permit. Makepeace continued to be absorbed in his solemnly awful reverie for some minutes before he broke silence; and when he did again speak, his voice was lower and sounded more hollow, more sepulchral than hitherto.

"I mean at once to speak of the particular night when the crime was committed," began the murderer. "His lordship the late Earl had for some time slept apart from her ladyship; and it was my duty to attend upon him in his dressing-room whensoever he performed his toilet. On the evening in question, I attended his lordship in that dressing-room, as usual, when he was about to retire for the night; and this, as near as I can recollect, was a quarter to eleven o'clock. There was evidently something which the Earl wanted to say to me, and which I knew by his manner was affording him gratification to contemplate. Presently he began by observing that there would shortly be a bridal in the family, and that we should all be very busy for the next few days in making preparations for it; and then he added, 'Yes, there can be no doubt, Makepeace, everything is going on very comfortably; matters are coming to an issue at last; Lord Osmond and Miss Vincent will go together to the altar.'—His lordship then proceeded, in his own peculiar style, to descant upon a variety of arrangements which he had already thought of for the bridal; and amongst other things he spoke of the wedding-presents which he intended to make to his niece Miss Vincent.—'Makepeace,' he said, 'the evening before the wedding-day we will have all the gifts arranged upon the table in Isabella's dressing-room: she shall not know anything about it previously; so that when she retires for the night, she will be most agreeably surprised. I shall go to-morrow to buy a set of diamonds for her, and all sorts of jewels; and they shall be put into a beautiful casket. The Countess will of course contribute her presents according to her own good taste. But I tell you what I mean to have for the central ornament of the table. There shall be an elegant porcelain vase, filled with bright new sovereigns, all of her present Majesty's reign. In a word, Makepeace, I mean to have two thousand of them in this vase; and I think the present will be as handsome as *unique*.'—I ventured to suggest to his lordship that there might be some difficulty in procuring so many new sovereigns at so short a notice. His lordship smiled; and told me that for some time past—indeed from the very first moment that he thought of marrying Miss Vincent to his son—he had been thinking and preparing for this particular gift. I had access to all the cupboards in his rooms except one; and of this his lordship was wont to keep the key. He bade me take that key and open the cupboard to which it belonged. I did so; and his lordship, still with a smile, indicated a jar, the mouth of which was covered over with paper, and which I at first took to be a jar of preserves or pickles. His lordship lifted off the paper, and showed me that the jar was nearly filled with bright new sovereigns. He poured a quantity out upon the bed. At that very instant Satan whispered in my ear: that shining gold became an irresistible temptation—and that bed upon which it was thus poured out, became the bed of death on which the old man's blood was likewise to be poured out!"

Here Makepeace paused in the midst of his narrative of frightful interest, and which Mr. Slater was duly committing to paper. The murderer shaded his countenance with his hands for nearly a minute, and then slowly resumed his tale in the same deep hollow voice as before.

"His lordship informed me that there were exactly eighteen hundred sovereigns in that jar—for that whenever he had drawn money from his banker for some weeks past, he had carefully selected the coins of recent mintage and had deposited them there. He added that he should on the morrow call at his banker's and procure a sufficiency to make up the two thousand. After some more conversation, his lordship dismissed me for the night: and I retired to my own chamber. When there alone, the temptation assailed me with increasing force. Oh, I struggled hard against it!—but Satan appeared to be standing by my side and to whisper a thousand arguments into my ear. It seemed as if the tempter said, 'The Earl has communicated to no one else the existence of this hoarded treasure: it will not therefore be missed. You need not appropriate a single shilling from his purse, nor a single ring from amongst his jewels. Again, too, there are so many persons beneath this roof, that it will be impossible to fix the deed upon you if you only observe suitable caution. The Earl is capricious: you may think yourself necessary to him; but in one of his strange humours he may at any moment send you adrift; and you had better make a provision for yourself now that the means are within your reach.'—It was thus that the Evil One appeared to be tempting me; and I could not close my eyes

against him. I will not extend this horrible narrative one moment longer than is absolutely necessary. Suffice it, then, to say that I yielded to the temptation. I had retired to my bed—but I rose and slipped on a few things. I was only dressed so far, Mr. Slater," added Makepeace, solemnly, "as I was just now when unconsciously re-enacting the crime in imagination, and when you detected me."

There was another pause in the murderer's narrative, but briefer than the former one; and he then continued in the following manner:—

"The mansion was all quiet: I crept stealthily down-stairs—I sought the lower premises, and procured a carving-knife, which I sharpened on the steel."

The lawyer and the constable shuddered visibly: Makepeace perceived it—and he likewise shuddered, as his eyes looked dread and hollow upon them both for an instant.

"Ah! you may well be shocked," he continued, in a tone which was at first scarcely audible; "you may well recoil to the innermost confines of your being! Would to God," he exclaimed, with sudden and passionate vehemence, "the past could be recalled!——but it cannot! No, it cannot!" he added, his voice again sinking into the solemn lowness of despair. "But let me proceed:"—for he saw that Mr. Slater had desisted from writing, as there was no necessity to take down irrevelant or mere ejaculatory matter. "Armed with the dreadful weapon, I ascended the stairs: but I already felt as if I were a murderer, and my very shadow upon the walls which I passed, while carrying a light in my hand, startled and terrified me. Twice I turned to convey the knife down stairs again and abandon my purpose: but the Tempter was again at my elbow—his words were whispered in my ears—and his huge palm, spread out, seemed to display before my eyes the whole mass of bright shining gold. I ascended. Noiselessly the door of the dressing-room swung upon its hinges—and I entered. The Earl never slept with a night-light in his room: he used to say that it kept him awake. I was afraid to take my candle into the chamber, for fear lest the light flashing upon his lordship's eyes, should startle and arouse him. I therefore left it in the dressing-room. Listening at the door of communication between that room and the chamber, I could tell by his measured breathing that he slept profoundly. I entered the chamber, and was compelled to let the door close behind me: for it was made thus to swing of itself on its hinges. There was only the faintest glimmer of the moonlight in the room. With naked feet I approached the bed: the surrounding draperies completely concealed the poor old nobleman's form—but I hastily felt with one hand to ascertain the exact position in which he lay. The other hand—the one which grasped the murderous weapon—just touched his throat: he moved—but the next instant all was over!"

Again did the lawyer and constable shudder: again too did Makepeace shudder likewise—and again were his eyes turned upon his two horrified listeners with an awful hollowness of gaze.

"I have but very little more to say," he continued. "The jar of gold, for which I had thus committed the fearful crime, came into my possession: but not another article in that room did I take away with me. I stole down-stairs; and having well cleansed the knife with which the deed was committed, placed it on some dish which remained upon the supper-table in the servants' hall,—taking care to bury the blade in the gravy, so that its recent frightful use for another purpose could not possibly be detected. I then stole out of the house, and interred my treasure in the garden. But at the bottom of the same hole I buried likewise my shirt, which was stained with blood. I regained my own room, confident that every precaution had been taken to prevent the authorship of the crime from being brought home to me. And strange to say, I lay down and slept; and when I awoke in the morning, I did not feel as if my dreams had been troubled—so that I was all the more hardened and all the better able to assume an air of perfect innocence. In accordance with my usual duty, I was the first to enter the chamber of the tragedy on that morning. I gave the alarm——But you know all the rest!"

Makepeace ceased speaking; and Mr. Slater said in a solemn voice, "You are of course aware that this confession which I have taken down, will be produced before the magistrate in whose presence you will have to stand within a few hours hence?"

"I know it," answered Makepeace in a low voice. "I feel easier now—my mind appears to be relieved of a weight:"—and then, after a pause, he added, "I shall no longer dread to be left alone in the darkness of this cell."

Mr. Slater and the constable accordingly withdrew; and in the office attached to the station-house, they signed their names as attesting witnesses of the murderer's confession.

An hour afterwards the constable visited the cell, in order to see that everything was right: for it is customary to maintain a certain vigilance over prisoners charged with very heinous crimes. But as the officer threw the light of the bull's-eye into the place, a loud ejaculation burst from his lips on perceiving the position in which the captive appeared to be lying. This was lengthways on the floor, but with his head raised about a foot and hanging completely back. A nearer inspection, instantaneously taken, revealed everything. There were two small holes close together in the plank-work that formed alike a seat and a bed for that cell: through these holes Makepeace had fastened one end of his neckerchief—the other extremity was fixed with a running noose about his neck—and thus the murderer had succeeded in strangling himself!

It is impossible to suppose that he had contemplated self-destruction at the time when, remorse-stricken, he had made his confession: it must therefore be conjectured that when again left to the awful solitude of that cell, and entombed in its stupendous darkness, his reason had reeled—and he had thus ended his days as a desperate suicide.

END OF VOL. I. FOURTH SERIES.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE SELF-SACRIFICE DEMANDED.

We must now return to the Countess of Lascelles. She had retired to her own chamber shortly after Adolphus conducted the lawyer from the library to the room in which the old Earl had met his death and where his murderer was unmasked in the manner already described. It was understood that if Mr. Slater was successful in the aim which had induced him to take up his quarters in that chamber, he was to ring the bell continuously and violently, not merely as a summons for the household, but likewise as a signal that he had succeeded.

On retiring to her chamber, the Countess of Lascelles did not begin to disapparel herself: she had not the slightest inclination for slumber—her

mind was agitated with a variety of conflicting feelings. Great was her suspense in respect to the issue of Mr. Slater's experiment: for it was absolutely necessary to combine all possible evidences in order to bring the foul deed completely home to the assassin. She endeavoured to compose herself as much as she was able, and to steady the beatings of her fluttering heart as well as the throbbings of her brain: but these were indeed no easy tasks; and instead of sitting down tranquilly to await the signal so earnestly hoped for, she paced the chamber with quick uneven steps. Nevertheless, very different indeed was Ethel's present state of mind from what it had recently been when she had so confidently but loathingly regarded Adolphus as a murderer, and when day after day she was plunged into utter bewilderment or excited to the liveliest indignation on hearing herself denounced as a murderess. Yes: now that the horrible mystery had been so far cleared up, a tremendous weight was lifted from her mind: but still there was much yet to be done—and even when all this should have been accomplished, might Ethel ever hope for the enjoyment of happiness again?

Every now and then she stopped short in her agitated walk—and listened. Surely she had heard the bell? surely it was tingling in her ear? surely its vibrating sounds reached her from the distance where it hung? No—it was mere fancy on her part: all was in reality still: it was only that half-singing, half-droning sound which the ear perceives when the blood mounts up into the excited brain. But hark! *now* indeed the bell rings!—the sound is unmistakable—it peals with a violence that reverberates through the mansion——it is the signal of the lawyer's success, and Makepeace is unmasked!

Ethel's first impulse was to rush from the room and repair to the chamber where the scene announced by that signal was taking place: she felt an almost irresistible anxiety to assure herself that the detection of Makepeace was indeed complete, and that to no other or unforeseen circumstance was to be attributed the ringing of that bell. But all in a moment a fearful apprehension seized upon her—the apprehension lest Makepeace should proclaim her past amour with Adolphus. Her guilty conscience in this respect gave to her alarm the strength and potency of an absolute certainty that what she dreaded could not fail to occur; and thus she no sooner found herself relieved from one source of deepest anxiety, than she had to encounter another. She remained in her room a prey to the most fearful suspense.

All of a sudden one of her maids rushed in half-dressed, exclaiming, "O my lady! my lady! the assassin is discovered!—it is Makepeace!"

"I had foreseen it—I knew that it would be so," responded Ethel, much excited: "it was for this reason that Mr. Slater came to the house——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the maid: and then she at once comprehended how it was that her mistress had not as yet retired to rest.

"I will go to the drawing-room," said the Countess: "I must hear all particulars—I am full of suspense and anxiety——"

"Suspense and anxiety, my lady?" cried the maid, somewhat in astonishment. "Why, the murderer is discovered!—it turns out to be that infamous hypocrite Makepeace who went on so at the time about his poor dear lord——"

"I will go to the drawing-room, I tell you," interrupted Ethel still more impatiently: "and do you request his lordship the Earl—or Mr. Slater——his lordship will perhaps be better——to come to me there as soon as possible. Go quick, girl, quick!"

Ethel was very much excited, as the reader may judge from her unguarded as well as broken sentences; and the maid, at first astonished, came to the very natural conclusion that the excitement of all these proceedings had produced a somewhat hysterical effect upon her mistress. She therefore hastened away to do her ladyship's bidding: and returning to the vicinage of the deceased Earl's chamber, she reached the dressing-room door just as Makepeace was proclaiming the illicit loves of Ethel and Adolphus. The maid—who was a pure-minded, artless, inexperienced girl enough, and who had never previously suspected that which she now heard—was transfixed with a stupefying consternation. In a few moments, however, she heard the footsteps of Mr. Slater and the two domestics who had accompanied him, descending the upper flight after their successful search for the crock of gold: and the maid, not choosing to be deemed a listener there, hurried away.

But she had not acquitted herself of the mission she had received from Ethel; and when the next minute she thought of it, events were hurrying on with too much rapidity to furnish an immediate opportunity for the delivery of her ladyship's message either to Mr. Slater or the Earl of Lascelles. The officers of justice were coming to take the murderer into custody. Again was the tale of the illicit amour vociferously proclaimed—Makepeace was borne off—some of the domestics dispersed to their own chambers—others continued grouped together upon the landing outside the dressing-room door, to discuss the fearfully exciting incidents which had just occurred—and the lawyer, deeming it better to leave the young Earl to himself after the overwhelming exposure, retired to a bed-chamber—where, however, as the reader has seen, he was presently aroused to receive the confession of the murderer at the neighbouring station-house.

Adolphus had tarried behind in the fatal chamber where the late Earl had met his death, and whence the assassin had just been borne off in the custody of the officers of justice. The unhappy young man threw himself upon his knees by the side of that couch—buried his face in his hands—and sobbed audibly. What was to become of Ethel?—how would he himself ever be able to look the world in the face? His position was fearful: it was only just a single shade better than it recently was when subject to the extortionate demands of Makepeace on the one hand and to the accusations levelled against him by the Countess on the other.

Meanwhile the young maid-servant had retreated into a room on the same landing, in the hope of finding an opportunity to deliver Ethel's message to Adolphus, whom she had not as yet seen emerge from the fatal chamber. She kept the door ajar in the room to which she had thus retreated, and watched for his appearance. Several

minutes elapsed; and at length she heard footsteps. She beheld the young Earl come forth: a light that was burning in the passage, threw its beams upon his countenance; and the damsel felt her blood run cold as she saw how ghastly pale and how convulsed it was. She scarcely dared issue from the room to deliver the message; and yet she felt that under existing circumstances it was one which she ought not to keep back; for after such a frightful exposure the Countess and Adolphus might indeed have much to deliberate upon—and that speedily too. Accordingly, mustering all her courage, the lady's-maid came forth, and said to the Earl, "My lord, her ladyship bade me inform you that she is in the drawing-room, and desires to see your lordship before you retire to your own chamber."

"Which drawing-room?" asked Adolphus, in a voice so deep and hollow that it made the girl recoil as if from the presence of an animated corpse.

"In the Red Drawing-room, my lord," she answered, regaining with a mighty effort a sufficiency of self-possession for the purpose.

She then fled away to her own chamber; and Adolphus proceeded to the Red Drawing-room, saying within himself, "Everything must be revealed to Ethel—it will be useless for me to conceal it—all the domesties would show her by their manner to-morrow that the terrible truth has been proclaimed. Good God! what will become of us both?—what will become of us?"

He entered the drawing-room; and as he appeared in the presence of Ethel, she was instantaneously struck by his worn, haggard, ghastly countenance,—a countenance which bespoke a thousand crushing evils; so that all her worst apprehensions were confirmed in an instant. He did not immediately speak—but fixed his eyes upon her: they had a hollow look—and, Oh! what a world of care was in their gaze!

"I understand you but too well, Adolphus," said the unhappy Countess, looking upon him with a gaze which in its expression was awfully akin to his own. "No sooner have circumstances emptied our cup of misery which was filled to the brim, than it is replenished to overflowing:"—then, after some deep guttural sounds, as if the words stuck in her throat, she added, "Makepeace has proclaimed everything—is it not so?"

"It is," he replied. "The miscreant has resolved that in *his* death would he do that which should embitter *our* lives until the end!"

"And the domestics," said the Countess,—"they now know everything?"

"Everything!" responded Adolphus. "Just heaven, it is frightful!"

"Frightful!" echoed the miserable lady: and turning aside for a few moments, she covered her face with her hands, her fingers pressing tight against her throbbing brows: but no tears trickled between those fingers—her's was now a despair too deep to find a relief in weeping. At length, as a thought suddenly struck her, she removed her hands from her face—and turning towards Adolphus, said, "It is now for you to do that which will materially alter our position before the world—and if not lift the branding disgrace completely from us, at all events divest it of its deepest shade of blackness."

"Good heavens! what mean you, Ethel?" exclaimed the young Earl, starting with sudden affright: for though he put this question, yet was he little at a loss to comprehend the significancy of her words.

"Adolphus, you *do* understand me," she answered, at once fathoming all he thought and felt; "and it is most ungenerous of you not to proclaim without an instant's delay that everything which you can do shall be done!"

"Ethel, Ethel!" gasped the young Earl: and he could say no more—but sinking on a seat, he gazed in consternation upon her.

"Is it possible, Adolphus, that you do not understand what I mean?" she asked: "will you thus force me to explain in the most measured terms of language? Well, then, be it so! The world," continued Ethel impressively, "believes that you are the son of the late Earl of Lascelles—and therefore that I am your step-mother. With such a belief our unfortunate love, when proclaimed, will be regarded as infamy itself: for what, Adolphus, could be more horrible than an amour of so incestuous a dye? Society will drive me with execration from its midst—yourself with scorn and loathing. Is all this to be, when one word spoken from your lips will in a moment reduce our tremendous crime, as it now appears, to a comparatively venial feeling? And that word must be spoken by your lips, Adolphus: it is the sacrifice which you must make for both our sakes. Oh, even then there will yet remain degradation enough for me——but spare me, Adolphus, that branding shame—that crowning infamy!"

"Ethel," responded the young Earl, in the same deep hollow voice as before, "you know not what you ask. You bid me divest myself of my patrician rank—to pluck the coronet from my brow—to resign the broad domains which call me master—to sink into an obscurity which will be total, like a star that goes out—and what is perhaps worse, to find myself plunged into comparative poverty!"

"I have a rich jointure, Adolphus," answered the Countess, with difficulty repressing a look of scorn and contempt at the objections which he proffered: "take it all—I abandon it to you, every shilling—I myself care not for poverty! But as for your title, you must resign it!"

"Never!" ejaculated the young Earl, goaded almost to madness by the thought.

"And yet there was a time, Adolphus," rejoined Ethel, reproachfully, "when I believed that for my sake you would have abandoned rank—position—everything——"

"Oh, but the madness of that love has passed, Ethel—and not only with myself," cried the young Earl, "but also with you! I cannot do it. To resign a proud title—an immense domain——No, no, I cannot!"

"Coward!" ejaculated the indignant lady; "you cared not to sacrifice me to your passion—but you recoil from the consequences! Did I not exert all my energies to remain virtuous? And was it not your incessant importunity — your frenzied entreaty—yes, even your threat of suicide which dragged me down into the abyss? And now you refuse to proclaim the word which is to mitigate the dark aspect of our iniquity! Why, insensate that you are, *you* would in reality be a greater

gainer than I: for how will the matter stand if you act as you ought to do? You are not the son of the late Earl of Lascelles: not one drop of his blood flows in your veins; and therefore no more discredit will attach to you for having intrigued with the Countess of Lascelles, than ever does attach itself to a man who indulges in an affair of gallantry. You will not be spurned by the world—you may still lift your head high. But how different will it be with *me!*—for though relieved from the darkest stain of the stigma, yet enough of its hue will rest upon me to stamp me as a fallen woman. Now then, sir, what is your decision?"

There was so much determination in the words, looks, and manner of the Countess of Lascelles, that Adolphus was smitten with a renewed consternation; and his dismayed looks were riveted upon the Countess. At length, as a sudden idea struck him, he sprang up from his seat, exclaiming, "Let us defy the world, Ethel!—let us set its opinion at naught! Let us dwell together—let us give back to each other all that love which we formerly cherished——"

"Never!" she ejaculated: and her eyes flashed sudden fire. "Never, Adolphus—never! The past has been fraught with guilt enough for us both—or at last for *me*: the future shall be stainless——it is impossible I could sin again!"

"But marriage, Ethel——"

"Marriage?" she shrieked forth. "What! while the world believes that you were indeed the son of my late husband? Oh," she added, with the blighting, withering laugh of utter scorn, "to what wretched expedients is your fevered imagination reducing you?"

"Ethel, you may say and do what you like," exclaimed the young Earl—"but you cannot force me——"

"Cannot force you?" she interrupted him. "And what if I myself proclaim the truth? What if I declare——"

"Who will believe you, Ethel?" interrupted Adolphus. "What would my answer be? That it was a tale devised by an unhappy woman, goaded almost to frenzy by her position—a tale devised for the purpose of palliating her fault before the world——"

"And you would do all this, Adolphus?" said the Countess, gazing upon him with an expression so strange, so wild, so sinister, that when he thought of it afterwards, he could not possibly fathom what its precise meaning might have been.

He did not immediately give any answer. Though in one sense he felt his position to be a tolerably strong one so far as the revelation of the secret of his birth might be concerned, yet on the other hand, he was far from being at his ease in respect to a woman who in the present as well as in recent circumstances, had displayed a mental energy, a resoluteness, a determination of which she had seemed incapable in those times when she was the soft, the tender, the yielding, fond partner of his guilty love. He therefore saw that everything must be done to conciliate or appease the Countess, if possible, short of the absolute concession of that which she had demanded; and his ideas remained fixed upon the project of defying the world and its opinions—of making her his mistress again—or even of marrying her if she thought fit—anything, in a word, so long as he might place a seal upon her lips with regard to the *one* tremendous secret that might give him much trouble and annoyance, even if it did not ultimately tear him down altogether from the pedestal of rank and fortune.

While these reflections were passing through the mind of Adolphus, Ethel had turned aside, and was again meditating profoundly. Her countenance was of the most ashy pallor—her features were rigid: a sinister light burnt steadily in those eyes that had once beamed only with love and tenderness: the bosom which had been wont to palpitate with the softest and most voluptuous sensations, was now upheaved and perfectly still: she was motionless as a statue—but all that was passing within rendered her very different indeed from the sculptured marble's inanimation. Adolphus regarded her with a furtive and uneasy look; and when she at length turned again towards him, he gave a sudden start in evident apprehension that this terrible conflict of words and feelings was to be renewed.

"We have said enough for the present," observed the Countess, in a voice of such cold monotony that it afforded not the slightest indication to whatsoever might be passing in her mind. "Let us separate for a few hours—to rest, if we can—but at all events let us separate. We shall find an opportunity of speaking to each other again; it must be soon—we will make up our minds how to act—and perhaps—perhaps," she added, her accents now becoming tremulous, and her features relaxing from their rigidity—"perhaps, Adolphus, we must make mutual concessions, so that we may have a due regard for all that has taken place between us, and for all that we may now best do in the interest of us both."

"Ethel—dear Ethel!" exclaimed the young Earl, scarcely believing his own senses; "you are becoming yourself again! Heaven be thanked that you now speak thus rationally!"

"Let us separate, Adolphus," she said, in a still milder tone than that in which she had just spoken; "and it may be that when the storm of excitement is completely passed, and our senses are rescued from the consternation and bewilderment in which they have been lately plunged, we may yet show each other that we are not utterly selfish!"

In the exuberance of the hopeful feelings thus suddenly conjured up in the soul of Adolphus, he seized the hand of the Countess and pressed it to his lips. She snatched it away—but not with any particular violence; and the next instant hurried from the room.

It was about an hour afterwards that the messenger came from the station-house to fetch Mr. Slater to receive the confession of Makepeace; and as neither Adolphus nor Ethel knew that he was thus summoned—for in their respective chambers they heard not the ringing of the gate-bell—the lawyer bade the domestic who had risen to answer that summons, forbear from disturbing his master and the Countess as they must have need of rest. On his return to the mansion, the solicitor sought his couch again: but when he arose at about eight in the morning, it was to receive the intelligence that the murderer had committed suicide in his cell. Then was it announced

by a valet to Adolphus, and by one of her maids to Ethel, that during the past night Makepeace had delivered a full confession of his crime, and that a few hours later he had perished by his own hand.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

BLOOMFIELD.

It was eleven in the forenoon: Mr. Slater had taken his departure; and Ethel, who had not dedescended to the breakfast-table, sent an intimation to Adolphus that she would join him in a few minutes in the library. The young Earl proceeded thither to await her coming; and as he paced to and fro with a certain degree of suspense, the following reflections passed through his mind:—

"Now is the crisis of this new phase in my fortunes! Will she yield? or is the warfare to be renewed? Anguish renders the soul capricious: and the mood may have changed again. If so, I must meet her valorously and resolutely. But no!—she will be reasonable: she saw last night that I was determined—and she altered visibly at the close of our interview. Why should she not agree with me to defy the world? Wealth procures pleasures that will enable us to live in enjoyment away from that society which banishes us. To love her again——No, that is impossible! The freshness—the enthusiasm—the glow of that love of mine, are gone for ever:—I feel, I feel that I am an altered man! But to toy with her as a mistress—or to endure her as a wife——Yes, yes—this is possible!—this is easy indeed!—and it may even be happiness, since it will put an end to strife—it will relieve me from apprehension—it will rescue me from a vortex of perplexities and cares!"

The door opened; and the Countess of Lascelles made her appearance. The first glance which Adolphus threw upon her, filled him with hopefulness: for though she was still very pale, and looked as if she had passed an utterly sleepless night,—yet her features had lost that rigidity which expressed so stern a resoluteness of purpose: and if there were not actually a conciliatory smile upon her lips, there was at all events a softness of mien that contrasted strikingly with her aspect at their last interview.

"Ethel!" exclaimed the young Earl, hastening towards her, "your look renders me happier than I have been for some time past! I see that you intend to be reasonable: we are to deliberate calmly and in a friendly sense—we are not to meet for altercation as enemies, battling as it were for separate and divided interests—but we are to take counsel together for what may be best suited for us both!"

"Such is the spirit, Adolphus, in which I meet you this morning," answered Ethel: and she did now really smile sweetly though faintly: it was with a melancholy sweetness—and at the same time she proffered him her hand.

"Dearest Ethel, I love you still!" he exclaimed, seizing that hand and conveying it to his lips. "Forgive me if last night I uttered things which were harsh—if I spoke of our love as something which had gone by, never to be recalled!"

"And I also, Adolphus," responded the Countess, suffering him to retain her hand without the slightest effort to withdraw it,—"I also must crave your forgiveness for the apparent implacability with which I urged a point that my better reason subsequently showed to be impossible of realization. There have been faults on both sides: let us cast a veil over them!"

Nothing could exceed the joy with which Adolphus listened to these words. He all of a sudden felt himself to be completely safe: his triumph was ensured with far less trouble than he had anticipated. In the enthusiasm of his feelings,—which the reader must not however mistake for a reviving love towards Ethel,—he snatched her in his arms and strained her to his breast. For a few moments she thus abandoned herself to him; and though she received the kisses which he imprinted upon her cheeks, she gave them not back again with her own lips.

"Now, dearest Ethel," said Adolphus, as she gently disengaged herself from his arms, "let us sit down and converse quietly and amicably—lovingly too——for may I not flatter myself that you have been reflecting upon the proposal I made to you last night?"

"Yes," she responded: and she sate down by his side. "Again must I assure you, my dear Adolphus," she continued—and this was the first time that she had used that caressing term of endearment for some weeks past,—"again must I assure you that when last night I rejected your proposals with so much emphatic sternness, I was not the mistress of myself. The intelligence of that frightful exposure had smitten me so cruel a blow—had come upon me with such suddenness——"

"Speak no more of it, dear Ethel!" interrupted the young Earl: "have we not agreed to throw a veil over the past—to forgive each other—to be lovers again——Aye, and did I not suggest," added Adolphus softly, "that we might be husband and wife if you chose?"

"I have made up my mind," answered Ethel, "to consent to anything that you think fit—on one condition."

"Name, name it!" exclaimed Adolphus hastily: for he was suddenly smitten with the apprehension that it would be something that he might not be able to grant and re-open the arena for discussion and altercation.

"It is a very simple thing, my Adolphus," responded the Countess, with increasing softness of tone and winning tenderness of look: "it is merely that you will bear me hence—this very day—at once!—hence, from a place which has so many horrible and saddening associations!—hence from the great metropolis where dwell all those whom I may never look in the face again!"

"Is that all?" cried the young Earl, infinitely relieved. "Why, dearest Ethel, it is the very thing which I myself should have proposed: for I am sick of scenes whereunto are attached such sad and awful memories!"

"Then it shall be as I say, dear Adolphus," murmured the Countess, again voluntarily abandoning to him her hand: "and I thank you—Oh! I thank you for this ready acquiescence with my request. But when shall we depart?"

"This very day—as you have said," replied

Adolphus. "Whither would you choose to go? To Bloomfield?—or on the Continent?"

The Countess appeared to reflect for a few moments; and then she said, "Let it be to Bloomfield. Delightful is the scenery in that district: the mansion itself is secluded—there are beautiful walks through avenues and lanes embowered with verdure at this season of the year—the air is fresh and revivifying—and we may there hope to regain a healthier tone for our mind and spirits."

"In all this I agree with you, Ethel," responded the young Earl. "We will depart to-day——or," he added, as a sudden thought struck him, "to-morrow at all events."

"And why not to-day?" inquired Ethel hastily.

"Because it is possible," responded Adolphus, "that my presence may be required at the Coroner's inquest upon the murderer and suicide Makepeace. But I will repair at once and ascertain. Meanwhile you can be making all your preparations for departure."

They then issued from the library,—the Countess repairing to her own chamber, and Adolphus proceeding to the station-house to learn such particulars as he needed relative to the inquest. He was informed that from a communication just received from the Coroner, his presence would not be required; the confession of the deceased fully cleared up the mystery of the murder, apart from all other evidence; and in respect to the deed of self-destruction, there was little to be said on the subject—for all was clear and apparent. Adolphus accordingly returned to the mansion; and at two o'clock in the afternoon he took his departure thence, in company with Ethel.

The Bloomfield estate, which had long been in the Lascelles family, was about thirty miles from London; and, as Ethel had already briefly described, it was composed of some of the most beautiful scenery to be found in the county where it was situated. Adolphus had brought with him only one valet—Ethel only one maid: for there were sufficient domestics for all purposes invariably kept at Bloomfield. The arrival of the young Earl and of the widowed Countess—who was of course believed to be his mother-in-law — was heralded by a messenger sent off on horseback an hour before they started from the metropolis; and notwithstanding the notice was so short, everything was ready for their suitable reception. The same messenger communicated to the household at Bloomfield the intelligence of Makepeace's detection and suicide; and he whispered likewise the exposure which had been made of the amour of Adolphus and Ethel. The servants who listened to these tidings, were naturally stricken with astonishment: but it was not their interest to exhibit any other feeling than one of welcome to their master and the Countess, when they alighted from the carriage which drew up in front of that beautiful country-seat.

During the journey from London Ethel had not spoken one word relative to marriage: she had given Adolphus to understand that she would submit to his will in all things,—with the exception however that she craved some little respite ere she again abandoned herself to him as his mistress. She represented that her husband had only died so recently and had perished so horribly—that so many frightful things had occurred—that her feelings had been so harrowed—that her health had suffered so greatly—and that she stood so much in need of repose and rest,—that she felt convinced he would exact from her nothing more than the demeanour of friendship for the present. He, on his side, was only too glad to conciliate her in any way, and to allow her to follow her own inclinations, not to yield an assent: he nevertheless feigned to grant it with reluctance, and to be impatient for the time when all the guilty past should be resuscitated so far as their illicit amour was concerned.

They arrived at Bloomfield, and took possession of the separate suite of chambers prepared for them: but they had their meals together—they passed the day together in-doors, or in rambling through the grounds;—and thus a week went by. During this interval they received a letter from Isabella, whom the intelligence had in the meantime reached that the guilt of Makepeace was discovered and that the wretched man had himself committed suicide. Miss Vincent wrote the fullest details in respect to all that had occurred to herself,—thus accounting for her sudden disappearance from the Gardiners' farm. She did not omit to mention that she had accidentally encountered Christian Ashton at Verner House—nor how he had delivered her from prisonage in the secret chamber. She intimated that it was her purpose to accept the kind invitation of Sir Edgar Beverley and Miss Hall to remain at Verner House until their marriage, which was shortly to take place;—and the whole tenour of her letter was kind and affectionate—for she felt that in some strange and unaccountable way she had done her aunt Ethel and her cousin Adolphus an immense injustice by believing that the crime of the old Earl's murder rested between them. As for Adolphus and Ethel themselves, they had too much to think of on their own account to pay any particular attention to the fact of Isabella having fallen in with Christian: and brief was the comment which Adolphus made upon the subject.

"Now that we have agreed," he said, "to bid defiance to the world and set its opinion at naught—and now too, dearest Ethel, that you are improving in health and spirits, and the time must be near at hand when you will throw yourself into my arms again,—it were all the better that Isabella should find a home elsewhere. Let her marry young Ashton: we will make them a handsome allowance; and at the same time that we thus rid ourselves of Isabella, we shall be performing all our duty towards her."

Ethel assented; and the subject at once dropped.

After breakfast one morning—when Adolphus and the Countess had been about a week at Bloomfield—she said to the young Earl, with smiling countenance and caressing look, "You are indeed most kind to devote so much of your time to me——I may say *all* your time!"

"You see, Ethel," he answered, "that I study my best to ensure your happiness. But when will you be altogether mine again?"—for he was anxious to rivet as soon as possible the bonds which held them together; though at the same time careful to avoid the appearance of tyrannizing over her actions or in any way forcing her inclinations.

"Soon, dearest Adolphus," she responded, inclining her head upon his shoulder: "soon!—for you are becoming dear to me again——yes, very dear!"

"Is it indeed so, Ethel?" he exclaimed, with a gush of feeling that might very well have been taken for the real joy of love itself—whereas it was only the satisfaction of hope at the idea that she would soon be so completely his slave again as to be beyond the reach of any latent inclination that might still exist to proclaim the whole truth to the world according to her proposition a week back at the mansion in the suburbs of London.

"Yes—dearest Adolphus," she responded, still suffering her head to recline upon his shoulder, "I love you—— and, when you will," she murmuringly added, "I will be your's again——your's wholly!"

Adolphus encircled the lady's slender waist with his arm—drew her face towards him—and imprinted kisses upon it. Whether it were indeed the country air, together with the unusual amount of walking exercise which she had lately taken—or through an altered state of the mind—or from all these causes united, we cannot say: but certain it is that her appearance was considerably improved during the week that she had already passed at Bloomfield. Still the traces of recent care were perceptible upon her cheeks: her form too was more slender than it was wont to be in the voluptuous symmetry of its proportions: nevertheless there was still the soft lustre in her large clear blue eyes,—still the pearly whiteness of the teeth shining between the parting roses of the lips—still the bright glory of the rich auburn hair. And as Adolphus thus drew her towards him, he felt something like a feeling of tenderness returning,—until slowly into his mind came back the recollection of the bitterness of all those altercations which had taken place between them; and in the presence of these recollections the softer feelings gradually disappeared, as twilight recedes when the shades of night come on.

But not by his countenance did he exhibit the change that was thus taking place in his mind: there was a smile upon his features, while bitterness was arising in his heart; for, as the reader comprehends, it was his interest, and therefore his purpose, to play a deep game—to assume everything that was conciliatory—to simulate affection—and to veil every thought that might shock or give offence. And Ethel herself had now one arm thrown over his shoulder; and as he was seated, and she was standing by him, or rather half-reclining in his arms, she looked down into his countenance. There was a smile upon *her* features likewise: her eyes appeared fraught with a reviving tenderness; and Adolphus said within himself, "Yes—truly she loves me well again!"

"We will go forth to walk," said the Countess: "the weather is beautiful—the air is delicious—and there is that wild part of the estate, you know, my dear Adolphus, which we have not yet visited since we were down here, but which is so picturesque."

"You mean the Maiden's Bridge?" said the young Earl.

"Yes," exclaimed Ethel: and instantaneously disengaging herself from his arms, she hurried towards the door,—adding, "I will put on my bonnet and scarf in a moment, and be with you."

In a few minutes they were walking forth together,—the young widow leaning upon the arm of the young nobleman. There was a heightened colour upon her cheeks—a deeper roseate tinge than for some time past had displayed itself there; and her eyes too appeared to shine with a happier lustre.

The weather was indeed beautiful—the sunbeams irradiated the entire landscape—but there was a breeze which prevented their extreme sultriness from being felt. The way of the ramblers led first through the spacious park—then across the fields, in the direction of a wooded dell in the distance.

"Is there not some strange legend attached to the spot which we are about to visit?" inquired the Countess, as she walked by the side of Adolphus, leaning on his arm.

"To be sure!" he exclaimed: "did you never hear it? It is that legend which gives its name to the bridge."

"No—I never heard it," responded the Countess: and suddenly stooping down, she plucked a wild-flower which grew by the side of the pathway. "What is that legend?" she inquired, tearing to pieces the floweret she had just culled.

There was something slightly wayward or peculiar in her manner, as it struck Adolphus for a moment: but attributing it to the return of a certain buoyancy of spirits with the change of scene and the fresh air of Bloomfield, he ceased to think of it.

"And so you never heard the legend of the Maiden's Bridge?" he said. "And yet methinks this is not your first visit to Bloomfield?"

"No," she responded: "I was here once before. It was with the late Earl," she added softly; "and then for so short a time that though I paid a hurried visit to all these scenes of interest, yet I had not leisure to inquire particularly about them. Besides," she exclaimed, in a gayer tone, "to listen to legends of this sort, one must have a companion who can tell them pleasantly or pathetically, as the case may be."

Adolphus was charmed at this rapidly altering manner of the Countess: for never since her husband's death had she seemed so gay as on the present occasion; and he therefore felt convinced that within a very brief space of time she would abandon herself completely to him again. Besides, with this return of good spirits, there was all the less chance that she would relapse into the dark sombre mood that would prompt her to demand the sacrifice of himself.

"After so pretty a compliment to my powers as a legend-teller," he said, smiling,—"a compliment which, though implied rather than pointedly uttered, I am vain enough to take unto myself,—I cannot delay the tale you are so anxious to hear. You have visited the dell before? If it were in Scotland, or in any wilder district than this, it would be called a ravine. Deep and rapid is the stream that runs at the bottom; and for several feet upward above the turbid bosom of the water, the sides are perfectly escarped. Do you remember all this, Ethel?"

"Yes—I think so," she answered: "but my recollection of the place is by no means strong,

though it is barely eighteen months since I visited it."

"You will presently find my description accurate," continued Adolphus. "But is it not singular that over the most dangerous of places there should be the most dangerous of bridges?"

"The bridge is so little used, doubtless," suggested Ethel, "that it has not been thought worth while to form a larger and a safer one."

"And yet with all the improvements," said Adolphus, "that have been made upon the estate by the late Earl and his father before him, is it not astonishing that they should have left that vile old crazy wooden bridge? I vow, Ethel, that to-morrow I will give orders for a new one."

"And perhaps spoil the wild picturesque beauty of the scene," added the Countess; "or at all events destroy the interest of the Maiden's Legend."

"But conceive, Ethel, a bridge not more than a yard wide, and with only a rail on one side!—so that if some unfortunate creature in a tipsy state, or suddenly seized with giddiness, should be passing over, down he must go, full fifty feet, into the stream beneath—and nothing could save him! For, as I have told you, the sides are all escarped——"

"It is indeed dangerous," observed Ethel; "and perhaps you would do well——But, come! it will be time enough to think of a new bridge to-morrow. For the present let me have the legend."

"A legend, by rights," resumed Adolphus, again smiling, "ought to go back for at least two or three hundred years—whereas this belongs to a period of no more ancient date than about the close of the last century. Indeed, the very cottages that are associated with the tale—for it is a perfectly true one—may be seen in the valley on the other side of the hill bordering the ravine. Those two cottages were inhabited by peasant families—as I suppose they are now. An elderly couple lived in one—and an elderly couple in the other. To one couple belonged a son, who of course was exceedingly handsome—or else he would not be fitted for the hero of a romance, much less for a gay deceiver, as he was: while the other couple possessed a daughter, who was as lovely as every heroine ought to be. And it followed—likewise as a natural occurrence in a tale——"

"But you tell me," said Ethel, laughing, "that it is a true one—and yet you are treating it as a romance?"

"It is indeed all true, though I may seem to treat it with a certain gaiety, which is rather derived from the infection of your buoyant spirits, my sweet Ethel, than from the nature of the legend itself, which has a termination anything but comic. However, as I was about to observe, the handsome young peasant and the beautiful young damsel fell in love with each other. They were wont to ramble forth on a summer evening; and I know not why, but certain it is that they used to take their station upon the bridge, where they mingled their sweet voices while the stream was gurgling beneath. Matters went on for some months, until at last the young peasant swain,—who must have been sadly fickle,—was smitten with the beauty of a damsel in the village yonder—the daughter of a small tradesman who had just taken a shop there. He gradually neglected his first love, and devoted his attentions to his new one. Perhaps he thought it perferable to espouse a tradesman's daughter than a girl in his own sphere; or perhaps he was really more enamoured of his new love than of his old. The neglected fair one reproached him not: but she pined and faded visibly. She avoided him: for her pride would not suffer her to throw herself in the way of one who no longer loved her. At length, in the course of a few months, everything was settled for the bridal of the peasant and the tradesman's daughter: the village was all excitement and curiosity—for these rural weddings are a source of general glee in the little communities where they take place. And now, Ethel, you must suppose that the eve before the bridal morn had arrived; and the happy swain was returning at an earlier hour than usual from a visit to his intended, so that he might have leisure to complete his preparations for the morrow. It was about nine o'clock on a charming moonlit evening that he was thus passing through the valley on his way back to the cottage where he dwelt with his parents,—when a female figure came gliding towards him. It was the deceived and betrayed girl. She at once assured the young man that she came not to reproach him, but to crave a last boon. He was remorse-stricken and afflicted; and he swore to grant it. She said that as their vows had been pledged in the sight of heaven, and as they had never released each other from those vows, it was only meet and proper that they should do so now, as solemnly as they had plighted them. The poor girl added that the phantasy had seized upon her for this ceremony to take place in its mournfulness, where their troth had been pledged in its happiness; and the swain, believing that her intellect was affected, and full of remorseful compassion, assented to whatever she might propose. They proceeded together towards the bridge,—walking in silence side by side, and without touching each other's hands. A young shepherd of their acquaintance, who was close by at the time—though he himself was unseen, being concealed behind a clump of trees—heard and beheld all that passed. Inspired by curiosity, he followed them, still unperceived,—which could scarcely have been a difficult task, for they were doubtless absorbed entirely in their own thoughts. They reached the bridge—they entered upon it—and the shepherd posted himself behind a tree, where, in the clear moonlight, he purposed to watch all that took place. They reached the middle of the bridge. At that moment a cloud obscured the moon: the shepherd heard the young maiden's voice saying plaintively, '*Forgive me, my well beloved!*'—then there was an awful cry, quickly followed by a loud splash in the waters beneath—and all was over! The two bodies were found on the following day about three miles distant,—the arms of the girl still tightly clasped around the neck of her faithless but adored swain—yes, as tightly clasped as they must have been when she threw herself with him from the bridge!"

"And that is the Maid's Legend?" said Ethel. "It is truly an affecting tale—but romantic enough to be improbable."

"Think you, then," inquired Adolphus, "that whatsoever is wildly romantic must be mistrusted?"

"It is of course to be received with more caution," responded the Countess, "than that which is natural and of every-day occurrence."

"Were it an every-day occurrence," answered the young Earl, smiling, "there would be no interest in the tale. But here is the bridge!"

For the last few minutes they had been threading their way along a path which ran through a grove; and a slight winding in that path suddenly brought them within sight of the bridge, which was about a dozen yards distant. The gurgling waters in the depth of the ravine now plainly met their ears; and Adolphus said, "The spot is wildly picturesque: I do not know, after all, but that it were a sin to build a new bridge here."

"Oh, I am sure," exclaimed Ethel, "you, my dear Adolphus, will never do it!"—and thus speaking, she stopped short at the commencement of the bridge, from which point the eye could sweep along the depth of the dell.

"At all events," said the young Earl, "I will order another hand-rail to be laid across—for this is positively dangerous."

"Dangerous—no!" ejaculated the Countess, with a laugh. "But these cottages of which you were speaking, and where the two families dwelt——"

"They are in the valley behind the eminence on the opposite side of the ravine. That is the tree which, as the legend tells, concealed the shepherd who was a witness of the catastrophe."

"I should like to see the cottages," observed Ethel,—"the clump of trees likewise, behind which the shepherd was hidden—and the spot where the young maiden met her faithless lover on the memorable night which marked their doom."

"Have you really the courage, Ethel," inquired Adolphus, "to cross the bridge?"

"Oh, the courage!" she ejaculated, laughing gaily. "Is it so grand an achievement, after all? Look! you shall see:"—and she tripped upon the bridge.

The young Earl at once followed her. It was with a light step, and her hand scarcely touching the rail, that she thus advanced till she gained the middle of the bridge. There she stopped short; and looking over the rail, contemplated the foaming water which was flashing brightly in the sunbeams.

"Perhaps it was here, Adolphus," she at length said, turning towards her companion,—"here, upon this very spot, that the catastrophe took place?"

"Yes—the legend says," he answered, "that it was in the middle of the bridge, according to the tale which the shepherd subsequently told."

"And here, then, they fell over," said Ethel, "the girl's arms tightly clasped around the neck of him who was the ruin of her happiness?"

"Yes—here," rejoined the young Earl, turning round at the same time, as the Countess had done, to contemplate the water from the side which was unprotected by the handrail.

"Forgive me, Adolphus!" suddenly exclaimed Ethel.

At the same instant her arms were thrown about his neck: tightly were they clasped—a wild and fearful cry thrilled forth from his lips—one desperate struggle to disengage himself—but all in vain!—over they fell—down, down they went! The entire ravine, the grove, and all the adjacent district echoed with the terrific cries of the young lord: but not another sound than the words "*Forgive me, Adolphus!*" which she had uttered, came from the lips of Ethel. There was a terrific splash; and away their bodies were borne, the arms of the Countess still tight around his neck—her hands clasped—as if those arms and hands of her's constituted an iron vice!

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

THE GRAVE-STONE.

THE reader will not have forgotten that beautiful little village in Westmoreland where Barney the Burker obtained the situation of assistant gravedigger to old Jonathan Carnabie. To this village we must now return.

It was an early hour in the morning; and a female, clad in gipsy-like apparel, stood in the middle of the churchyard, contemplating that grave-stone which bore the simple inscription of "*October*, 1830." There was nothing wild in her look now—nothing wandering nor restless: it was fixed and replete with sadness. For several minutes did she thus stand gazing upon that head-stone, as if the singular conciseness of the inscription thus rivetted her attention—or else as if there were something in the date which more or less associated itself with certain memories floating in her brain.

The reader of course recognises Crazy Jane; and it is therefore useless to observe any mystery upon the point. The woman had intervals which, if not positively lucid, were at all events characterized by a certain clearness of perception in comparison with other periods; as, for instance, when she gave the information which led to so startling a turn in the trial of Lettice Rodney. The present occasion was one of the happier moods of her intellect, as she stood gazing upon the tombstone; and if an observer had been nigh, he might probably have perceived that beneath that fixity of look and mournful calmness of countenance, there was a certain inward agitation or excitement, arising from the powerful efforts and the straining attempts which the poor woman was making to disentangle her thoughts completely and marshal all her mental associations for the purpose of clear and intelligible review.

"He spoke of a poor mad lady," she presently said in a murmuring tone to herself; "and *who* was likely to have been driven mad if not my poor dear mistress? That date ——but, Ah! my ideas grow confused again——No, no! I cannot rightly understand that which it appears as if I seek and want to comprehend!"

She turned away slowly and mournfully; and just at that instant old Jonathan Carnabie and his new assistant were advancing towards the gate of the churchyard.

"Ah!" she ejaculated, "there are the men whom I seek!——they were together the other night when they said something which struck me so strangely!"

"Here is this poor crazy creature again," said old Jonathan. "I wonder why she is hanging about the village? We must find out where she belongs, and have her passed to her parish: it will never do for her to become chargeable to our local rates."

"You are the man, Mr. Carnabie," said the Burker, "to get rid of her. Go and try your eloquence. There! blow me if I haven't forgot the mattock—and I'll just run and fetch it."

"Do," responded the old sexton: and he advanced towards Crazy Jane, who, being at a distance of about fifty yards, had not overheard a single syllable that passed between the sexton and his assistant.

Meanwhile the Burker, turning rapidly away, had sped back to the cottage.

"My poor woman," said Jonathan, accosting Crazy Jane, "you seem to be a houseless wanderer——"

"A wanderer?—yes!" she ejaculated: "because it is my destiny! My mind will not let me rest. Houseless did you say? No—not when I choose to ask for an asylum: for who would refuse it to a poor creature such as I am? Besides," she added, after a pause, "I can pay for what I have when payment is required."

Thus speaking, she dived her lank hand down into a pocket, and drew forth a quantity of coin. Silver and halfpence were all jumbled together; and it struck the old sexton that he caught the glitter of two or three pieces of a still more precious metal. But the next instant Crazy Jane had transferred the money back to her pocket,—exclaiming with a sort of triumph, "So you see that I am not altogether a mendicant, though you perhaps took me for one?"

"I am well pleased, my poor woman," answered Jonathan, "to find that you are thus independent of casual charity. But why are you not with your

friends?—for to possess money argues to a certain extent the possession of friends——"

"Yes,—yes—I have friends," ejaculated Crazy Jane,—"friends who sought to do everything for me: but no!—my wandering spirit would not suffer me to stay where they placed me. Do you know, old man," she added, advancing close up to him, and speaking in a low voice, as well as with a certain mysterious significancy of look,—"do you know that if ever I remain long in one place, something whispers in my ear that I must go forth on my travels again—for that there is something which I seek—and that something I must find!"

"And what is this something which you seek?" asked the old sexton in a gentle voice; for he pitied the poor woman.

She had fallen into a deep reverie: she did not hear the question—or if she did, she chose not to answer it; and for upwards of a minute did silence thus prevail. At length suddenly raising her eyes, she fixed her looks upon the gravestone with the strangely brief inscription—and abruptly asked, "Who lies there?"

"A poor lady," responded old Carnabie, "who died in this village under very distressing circumstances."

"Yes, yes—I remember! you said so the other night!" ejaculated Crazy Jane. "I heard you telling that man who was with you——But, oh! my memory is so bad!" and then she pressed her hand, as if with a sensation of pain, against her forehead.

"You told me on that night," continued Jonathan Carnabie, "that you wanted to ask me some questions. If you like to put them now, I will give you any information that lies in my power."

"That lady," said Crazy Jane, keeping her eyes still riveted upon the gravestone,—"was she not mad? did I not hear you say that it was a deep, silent, brooding madness? Yes, yes! those were the words!" cried the poor creature, with a sudden exultation at having recollected them.

"And what I said was the truth," answered Jonathan Carnabie. "It was a sad tale—and if I thought you could understand it, or follow my words while I tell it——"

"I shall understand it," interrupted Jane. "Yes—my mind is clearer now—my ideas are collected—I shall be able to listen to you. Proceed, before the cloud again comes over me."

"You see that stone bears the date of October, 1830," began the sexton: "but it was in the beginning of the same year—therefore a matter of eight months before that date—that as I was coming early one morning to open the church to ring the bells for a marriage which was to take place, I saw a female lying across one of the graves with her face downwards. I hastened towards her, and lifted her up. I thought she was dead—she was as pale as a corpse, and as cold as one too. But how beautiful!"

"Ah, beautiful indeed!" murmured Crazy Jane. "But go on—go on. Had she dark hair—long flowing dark hair?"

"In truth she had not at *that* time," replied the old sexton: "for her head had been closely shaved——"

"Oh, to cut off that beautiful, beautiful hair?" exclaimed the mad woman, clasping her hands and shaking herself as if in rage from head to foot.

"Did you know her, then?" asked old Jonathan eagerly: "is it possible that you knew her? or do you only suspect who she was?"

"No matter!" interrupted Crazy Jane impatiently. "Proceed, I tell you."

"Well," continued the sexton, glancing at his singular companion's countenance in order to assure himself, so far as he could judge, that she was in a suitable frame of mind to hear what he had to say, and therefore to render it worth while for him to proceed,—"I went and picked up the lady, as I have just told you—for a lady she was by every appearance, though her dress was much travel-soiled;—and I found that she was in a deep swoon. I bore her off to the parsonage, which you see close by. The rector and his family were all absent at the time, on a visit to some friends in Lancashire: there was no one but a female-servant in the house—but she did her best to recover the poor lady from her insensibility. When she opened her eyes——"

"And those eyes," ejaculated Crazy Jane eagerly, "were large and dark—bright, but sweeetly expressive? Oh, methinks I see them now!"—and the poor creature suddenly burst forth into an agony of convulsive sobs.

"Truly this woman must have known that lady well," thought Jonathan Carnabie to himself: and suffering a minute or two to elapse until Crazy Jane's paroxysm of grief was moderated, he said slowly and quietly, "Yes, to the best of my recollection the lady *had* large dark eyes: but as for their lustre, it was gone—and as for their sweetness of expression, it was lost in the dull vacancy of her gaze."

"Poor dear lady!" murmured Crazy Jane. "Oh, what must she have suffered! what must she have suffered! And *my* sufferings—they have been as nothing in comparison! Do you mean, old man—do you mean that she was mad?"

"I do," answered Jonathan: then after a pause, he went on to say, "I was telling you that I conveyed her into the parsonage, where the servant-girl attended upon her; and though she came back to life, it could scarcely be called to consciousness—for the poor creature's mind seemed totally gone. She took no more notice of anything than a child of six months old. Stop!—I forgot! Yes, when the maid undressed her, there was a small velvet bag, sewn all round—a little bag not near so large as the palm of your hand—and it was fastened to a black ribbon round her neck. This, as the maid told me—for of course I was not present when the lady was undressed—she clutched with a sudden vehemence, crying out, 'No, no! you shall not take it from me!'—The girl never meant to take the bag away; and therefore she at once told the poor lady not to be frightened on that score. This was the only thing she seemed to take any notice of; and when she found that the bag was safe, she relapsed into her dull dead apathetic condition, having no further regard for anything. A surgeon was sent for; and he said that the poor lady was utterly bereft of her senses—that her mind was a perfect void—that her reason was totally gone. Of course we all thought that as her head was shaved, she had escaped from some lunatic asylum, and that it would not there-

fore be very difficult to find out where she had come from. Nevertheless, she had evidently been walking far; for her shoes were worn right through—her stockings also—and the soles of her feet were cut and bleeding."

Here Crazy Jane gave a deep convulsive moan; and staggering against the grave-stone, with the concise inscription, she leant over it weeping bitterly. Several minutes thus elapsed, until she suddenly raised her countenance again; and then it wore a look so altered—so wild—that the old sexton felt convinced the poor creature was now no longer in a frame of mind to listen to his story. And she herself speedily made him aware that he was perfectly right.

"No more now!" she ejaculated: "not another word for the present! What you have said is impressed *here!*"—and she pointed vehemently three or four times to her forehead: "but my brain could bear no more!"—and there was a maniac wildness in her eyes. "Oh, I have already heard too much—too much! Another time, old man, I will come back and hear what more you have to say. Ah! you took me for a beggar and a mendicant," she ejaculated, suddenly stopping short as she was just on the very point of coming away: then, diving her hand down into her pocket, she brought forth three or four shillings; and flinging them towards him, cried, "Go drink to the health of Crazy Jane!"

With these words she hurried away; and turning the angle of the church, was lost to the view of the old sexton, who stood gazing after her until she thus disappeared.

"She is a strange creature," he muttered to himself, as he stooped down and picked up the coins: "I hope she will keep her word and come back—for she evidently knows something about the poor lady. Or perhaps after all it may only be a portion of her madness? Yet it would be strange, though, that she should know the colour of her hair and eyes: for now that I bethink me, when the poor lady's hair did grow again, it was black. I wonder whether——But we shall see all in good time, no doubt. Crazy Jane is pretty sure to return. But where is that precious assistant of mine all this while?"

We will explain the real cause of the Burker's somewhat abrupt disappearance and prolonged absence, under the pretext of fetching a mattock from old Carnabie's cottage, though he knew perfectly well that the implement had been left along with others, on the previous evening, inside the church-porch. The fact is, Mr. Barnes did not like the appearance of the mad woman. On the night that she had so suddenly presented herself to him and the sexton, he was smitten with a certain suspicion; and therefore he had taken very good care not to speak a single word, for fear his voice should be recognised. When she had fled so precipitately, he buoyed himself up with the hope that she would not return again into that neighbourhood—but that her steps, as wayward and unsettled as her own brain, would carry her elsewhere. Now therefore that she re-appeared in the same place, he was again seized with alarm; and yielding to that terror, had suddenly absented himself under the pretext which we have described. From the window of old Carnabie's cottage, he watched the woman and the sexton as they stood in discourse together in the churchyard; and as he perceived by her manner and her gesticulations that she was much excited, he feared lest the conversation regarded himself; but when she so precipitately hurried off again, and the sexton stood in a musing manner for a few minutes, the Burker's courage revived.

"If it was me they was talking of," he said to himself, "they would have gone off at once to raise the whole village and hunt me down like a mad dog."

The Burker thereupon issued forth from the cottage, and hastened to rejoin old Carnabie: but we will interrupt the progress of our narrative for a few moments, to depict the precise nature of the Burker's apprehensions.

He had of course read the newspaper-accounts of Lettice Rodney's trial at Liverpool;—and beyond what we ourselves have recorded on that subject in our narrative, the journals had given several minute particulars in respect to the female who without being brought forward in Court, had nevertheless, through the medium of another species of deposition, given so important a turn to the proceedings. The caterers for the public press had described her as a poor wandering maniac who had for some years been known in the neighbourhood of Liverpool: they had delineated her personal appearance, and had added that she was usually known by the denomination of Crazy Jane. All these particulars had Barney the Burker read at the time, for they were transferred from the provincial to the London papers; and thus when the woman so suddenly appeared before old Carnabie and himself in Woodbridge church-yard, he had been smitten with the apprehension that she was the person whose testimony, presented in writing to the Court, had led to the acquittal of Lettice Rodney, the incarceration of Mrs. Webber, and the subsequent arrest of himself. Still the Burker was not completely sure that this woman who now haunted the neighbourhood of Woodbridge, was in reality Crazy Jane—though he had certainly little doubt on the subject.

He rejoined the old sexton, as we have already said; and a furtive look, hastily flung upon Carnabie's countenance, convinced the miscreant that nothing disagreeable or threatening had transpired in reference to himself.

"Well, where is the mattock?" asked Jonathan, somewhat surlily: "and what made you such a long time in looking for it?"

"It was just because I could not find it that I stayed so long," answered the Burker; "and now I recollect, it's along with t'other things in the porch yonder. But you've had that poor mad creetur' a chattering away with you at a gallows' rate!"

"I can't rightly make her out," responded the sexton: "she is as demented as one can be in some respects—and yet she seems as if she had a sort of lucidity on one subject."

"And what's that?" inquired the Burker, as if with an air of indifference.

"Why, about the poor lady that is buried here," replied Jonathan, pointing to the grave headed by the stone with the concise inscription. "It appears as if she knew that lady; and so I was telling her the sad romantic story—which, by the bye, I promised to narrate to you one of these days——"

"Well, but she bolted away again like mad," interjected the Burker.

"Like mad, as she assuredly is!" rejoined the sexton. "I was only half through the story—she got much excited—said she would come back another day—and hurried off precipitately."

"I thought you meant to persuade her to get out of the parish altogether," observed Barnes, "as you wouldn't have no wagrants and waggabone mendicants here?"

"A vagrant she may be, poor creature!" said Jonathan, in a compassionating tone—"and a vagabond too for that matter; for the terms merely mean a wanderer without a settled home: but a mendicant she is not. She has plenty of money——"

"Plenty of money, eh?" said the Burker. "Where the deuce could she get it from?"

"*That* she did not tell me," answered Jonathan: "but she threw me a—a—sixpence—telling me to drink her health; and so you and I will have a drop of beer presently, when we have finished our morning's work."

"It must have been a sixpence in halfpence though," thought the Burker to himself; "for I saw you stoop several times, old feller, to pick the coins up; and I'll be bound it was a handful of silver—or else how should you know she had plenty of money?"—but Barnes only thus mused inwardly, and did not give audible expression to his thoughts; for he was particularly careful not to excite in any way the suspicions of the sexton.

"Yes," continued Jonathan, perfectly unconscious of what was passing in the mind of his assistant, "she has got a pocket well-filled with coin; and now I bethink me, she said I was to drink the health of Crazy Jane."

"What a rum name to call herself by!" observed Barney: but as he averted his countenance for an instant, its expression was ghastly—for the mention of that name had dissipated whatsoever little doubt there was in his mind, and had confirmed all his worst fears. "And so she's coming back again—is she?" he inquired.

"She says so—and I have no doubt she will," responded the sexton. "She has got something into her head about the poor lady that lies buried there; and I know enough of these crazy people to be aware that when once they *do* get hold of a particular crotchet, they always stick to it. She is as certain to come back as that you and I are here."

"Poor creature?" said the Burker, affecting a tone of sympathy, although at the same instant he resolved upon the destruction of either the sexton or crazy Jane—and perhaps of both.

"Though you are such a strange-looking fellow," said old Carnabie, "you have got a good heart—that is quite clear. One must not always go by the looks."

"I should raythor think not!" ejaculated the Burker, as he walked on by the sexton's side.

The two men proceeded to the accomplishment of the work they had in hand: but all the while the Burker was employed in digging a grave for some recently deceased villager, he was deliberating with himself upon the mode of executing the hideous purpose he now entertained. The toil continued till mid-day—at which hour Jonathan returned to his cottage; while the Burker proceeded to the public-house to fetch as much beer as might be purchased with the sixpence which Jonathan gave him, and which he represented as the extent of Crazy Jane's gratuity. After dinner the old sexton had some business to transact in the village; and the Burker's time was now at his own disposal. He repaired to the church-yard, so that in case Jonathan should return earlier than he had intimated, he might at once be found;—and lighting his pipe, he threw himself on the grass in the shade of a high tombstone; for the day was exceedingly sultry, and the sunbeams poured down with all their unclouded torrid strength. Flinging off his hat, the Burker covered his head with an old cotton handkerchief, and thus made himself as comfortable as possible, while enjoying his pipe and giving way to his reflections.

It will be necessary to observe that since the Burker had been in Jonathan Carnabie's service, he had occupied a little outhouse—or we might rather say a shed, attached to the sexton's cottage, and in which a truckle-bedstead had been placed for his accommodation. Mr. Barnes was soon in a condition to judge by Jonathan's habits that he was economical and saving: and he more than suspected that the old man had a little hoard in his cottage. Already had the idea flitted across his brain that if he could acquire a positive certainty on the point, he would help himself to the treasure—for treasure it would prove to him, no matter how small the amount,—and he might then betake himself to another district, or else get out of the country altogether. Now therefore that the Burker's alarm was excited in respect to the appearance of Crazy Jane in the neighbourhood of the village of Woodbridge, he was resolved to achieve that crime of which he had hitherto but vaguely and dimly thought. But if he could also possess himself of Crazy Jane's money, it would be an addition to the store he anticipated to derive from the other quarter; and the Burker was not a man to stick at a couple of crimes—no, nor a dozen either—if he could only thereby improve his present depressed condition.

While thus reflecting, and utterly unsuspicious of the possibility of being overheard, Barney began to give audible expression to his thoughts.

"Yes," he said, while leisurely smoking his pipe, "Woodbridge is getting a precious sight too hot to hold such a popular gen'leman as myself; and I must take my precious carcase off to another part of the world. That old scoundrel Carnabie is warm—I know he is; and I'll ferret out his hoard before I am a night older. If so be he wakes up—well then, there's the mattock, or the spade, or the crow-bar as will deuced soon cook his goose for him. And then that accursed she-devil Crazy Jane, which sp'iled all the hash at Liverpool—I shall like to give her a topper on the head—and by jingo, I'll do it too!"

Having come to this most comforting conclusion, the Burker re-filled his pipe; and a person who had been standing behind a tombstone, glided noiselessly away over the long grass. That person was Crazy Jane. After a few hours' interval since her discourse with Carnabie, she had returned to the churchyard in a lucid state of mind again, and in the hope of finding him that he might finish his narrative relative to the unknown lady who slept beneath the turf for which he had evinced so much care, unrecompensed and unrewarded, throughout so many years. But while wandering amidst the

tombstones in the hope of finding Carnabie, Crazy Jane had caught a glimpse of the Burker's form; and at once recognising him as the man whom she had seen with Jonathan, she thought of inquiring where the sexton himself was? She had approached noiselessly and unperceived, though she had not at first studied this degree of caution: just as she was about to address him, he began to speak; and his voice struck her with an effect as if a heavy blow had been dealt her. She knew it at once: it was that of the man whom she had heard conversing with Mrs. Webber at the back gate of Pollard's house at Liverpool, on the night when the murder of that unfortunate gentleman was accomplished. Crazy Jane glided behind the tombstone, and listened in dumb horror to the words of unmistakeable menace that issued from the villain's lips. When he had ceased speaking, she glided away, as already stated; and this time she *did* study to pursue her path as noiselessly as possible.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

WOODBRIDGE.

It was eight o'clock in the evening, when a post-chaise drove into the little village of Woodbridge, and stopped at the inn. A single traveller alighted —and this was Mr. Redcliffe.

In answer to the inquiries of the landlord, he stated that he might remain a day or two in that place; and he nodded an assent to the proposal that refreshments should be at once served up. These however he scarcely touched, and presently strolled forth to woo the gentle breeze of the evening, and perhaps to seek some solitude where for a while he might be alone with his own thoughts. He had certain inquiries to make in this neighbourhood; but he postponed them until the morrow —for his reflections during the day's travelling had, as was indeed often the case with the unhappy gentleman, excited his feelings to the extremest degree of tension.

His steps took him towards the churchyard: it was now a little past nine o'clock—the evening was beautifully clear—and slowly did Mr. Redcliffe pursue his way through the cemetery, contemplating the grave-stones. Presently his eyes settled upon that particular one which has been so often mentioned, and which bore the inscription of *October*, 1830. Jonathan Carnabie's care had recently blackened the indented letters forming this inscription; so that it was plainly visible on the gleaming white surface of the stone. Mr. Redcliffe was naturally struck by the singular brevity of this graven memorial of the buried dead; and the date too appeared to give a thrilling keenness to the memories that were floating in his mind.

"Singular epitaph!" he said in an audible tone: "wherefore the absence of any name to indicate to the passer-by who reposes beneath? Was it that the dead who lies here, was, when living, so stained with crime that surviving relatives, though bestowing the right of solemn obsequies, yet dared not perpetuate a name that guilt had rendered infamous? And yet it can scarcely be so: for if it were, the remains of this unnamed one would scarcely have found sepulture in consecrated ground!"

At that instant Mr. Redcliffe became aware of a human form approaching along the walk intersecting the churchyard: he saw that it was the form of a woman—and a second glance made him start and ejaculate, "Ah! *one* of the objects of my search!"

"Mr. Redcliffe," said Crazy Jane—for she indeed it was—and she presented herself with no greeting of courtesy, nor with any apology for her abrupt and secret withdrawal from the asylum which he had provided for her after the trial of Lettice Rodney,—"Mr. Redcliffe, there lies the one concerning whom you have twice or thrice spoken to me!"

Crazy Jane pointed with her lank arm to the grave; and Redcliffe, hastily turning aside, concealed from the woman's view the unutterable emotions which had suddenly found silent but eloquent expression in his countenance.

"Then she is dead!" he at length lowly murmured to himself: but the woman heard not what he said. "How know you," he inquired, after another pause of nearly a minute,—"how know you that she lies here?"

"You yourself shall know it from the same source whence I learnt it," answered Jane. "O Mr. Redcliffe! I am not mad at this moment. No, no!—never, never for long years have I understood myself so well as at this instant!—no, not even when telling all I knew to the magistrates and yourself in respect to the horrible murder at Liverpool! I heard things this morning," she continued, slowly and gravely, and in a perfectly collected manner, "which have made me reflect in a way that I have not reflected before for a long, long time. A change has taken place within me. I feel it *here*," she said, placing her hand upon her brow; "and I feel it *here*, too," she added, placing her hand upon her heart.

"I am rejoiced to hear you thus speak, Jane!" replied Redcliffe: but though he spoke of joy, there was nevertheless a deep sadness in his tone, —a sadness infused from the fountains of his heart.

"Yes, sir," proceeded the woman, "I felt that I had a mission to accomplish, crazed though I were —a mission to discover the fate of my beloved mistress; and at the very time when methought my footsteps were most wayward, heaven itself was guiding them towards the spot where the mystery was to be solved!"

"But, Oh! how is this mystery solved?" asked Redcliffe, in a voice where pathos, and anguish, and suspense were so commingled that they seemed to give to his accents a new tone, and at the same time the mournful workings of his countenance expressed such kindred feelings that they appeared to give it a new aspect.

Jane started as if something had suddenly galvanized her—as if some long-slumbering memory of the past was now all in an instant awakened; and with a species of dismayed suspense, strangely blended with a wondering joy that dared not have faith in the source of its own existence, her eyes were fixed keenly and searchingly upon him.

"Good heavens!" she ejaculated, "is it possible? Oh! what wild ideas are these?—ideas of the long lost—yea, even of the dead——"

"Hush, Jane — hush!" said Mr. Redcliffe: "for heaven's sake hush! I see that you know me!"

"Yes—as if by an inspiration!" exclaimed the woman, her eyes brightening vividly with the very feeling which she had just expressed. "But tell me—Oh! tell me," she instantaneously ejaculated, as another reminiscence flashed forcibly to her mind,—"you did not—no, you did not——"

"Hush, Jane! I know what you mean," interrupted Redcliffe. "No!—that heaven above which smiles upon us in its star-lit beauty, can attest——"

"Enough, enough!" murmured Jane: "I believe you—Oh, I believe you!"—and sinking down at his feet, she embraced his knees, sobbing with a variety of conflicting feelings, but amidst which a still wondering joy was the principal.

"Rise, my poor woman," said Mr. Redcliffe, so profoundly affected that the tears were streaming down his cheeks: "rise, I say, faithful—Oh, too faithful Jane!—so faithful to the memory of your beloved mistress that your reason has reeled and tottered, and been well-nigh wrecked utterly! Rise: it is not to me that you must kneel——But we should both kneel—and here too!" he added, pointing towards the nameless grave.

"I have been kneeling there this evening," answered Jane: "I have watered that turf with my tears, for I know whose remains lie beneath! And I invoked the sainted spirit of my beloved mistress——for a saint in heaven I know she must be!—I invoked her sainted spirit, I say, to intercede at the throne of Eternal Grace that my reason might be given back to me—and a soft voice seemed to whisper in my ear that the prayer was heard and that the boon I craved was granted! Then I arose from over the turf of that grave; and I was departing, when I beheld the form of some one stop here to contemplate the stone. I beheld you stand awhile on this spot—I marvelled who he could be that thus shared with me the deep, deep interest I feel in this grave: I approached—I recognised you."

"And now will you tell me, Jane," asked Mr. Redcliffe, who had listened with profoundest emotions to her statement—"will you tell me whence you learnt sufficient to conviuce you——"

"Mr. Redcliffe—for by that name will I still call you," interrupted Jane, a sudden reminiscence striking her—"there is this night a human life to be saved—and he who shall be thus saved, will tell you all! My knowledge of everything is but yet partial: the tale to which I listened remains unfinished——"

"And this life that is to be saved?" said Mr. Redcliffe, apprehending for a moment that the poor creature's intellect was wandering again: and he gazed upon her anxiously to see if his alarming surmise was well founded.

"No, no!" she exclaimed, penetrating what was passing in his mind; "my reason errs not again! It is as I assure you. In that cottage dwells the sexton, who can tell you the tale of this perished one's hapless fate; and his life is in danger—for the miscreant who did the deed at Liverpool, is in the neighbourhood——he is there!"

"What!" ejaculated Redcliffe: "Barnes—the murderer of Pollard—the man who escaped from gaol——"

"He is there!" responded Jane, pointing towards the cottage; "and he contemplates another crime. I was determined to frustrate it:—that very instant when I encountered you, was I about to repair to the village and invoke the aid of persons there to capture the murderer. I had been thinking for hours how I should best prevent the new crime and hand over the perpetrator of the old one to justice: for I feared—alas! I feared that whatsoever I might say would be taken only as the ravings of a poor crazed creature!"

"We will at once adopt measures!" ejaculated Redcliffe. "Come with me! Henceforth you must not be a wanderer! Come——But first of all one instant's devotion *here!*"

Thus speaking, he threw himself upon his knees by the side of the grave of the unnamed one: he bent over the turf—he covered his face with his hands—and Jane, who stood at a short distance, could hear the convulsive sobs that came from his troubled breast. When he slowly arose from his suppliant posture, his countenance, as the moonlight fell upon it, was ghastly pale: but yet it was not convulsed—it now wore the expression of a deep, serene, resigned mournfulness.

He and Jane, issuing from the churchyard, proceeded together in the direction of the village; and while walking thither, Mr. Redcliffe asked, "Wherefore did you leave that asylum which I provided for you, and where the people, though in humble circumstances, were so kind and good to you?"

"Have I not said, Mr. Redcliffe," responded his companion, "that I felt there was a mission to be fulfilled—and that by me it must be accomplished? I knew that if I asked permission to leave that home which you provided for me, it would be refused; I therefore stole away, taking with me the contents of the purse you so generously left me. And then, on becoming a wanderer again, I procured for myself the mean apparel which became a wanderer's condition——"

"Enough, enough, Jane!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe. "I was wrong to question you on the subject: I should have comprehended how your unwearying devotion to the memory of your beloved mistress would have thus rendered you a wanderer until you had ascertained her fate. And I too have been a wanderer!" said Mr. Redcliffe,—"a wanderer for the same object—but latterly to seek for you likewise, since I learnt your sudden flight from the cottage near Liverpool. It was not accident—it was heaven itself that brought me to this secluded village, that I might meet with you, and through you learn the solution of that sad and long-enduring mystery!"

They now entered the village; and the landlord of the little inn was astonished when he beheld his new guest returning in the company of that strange and gipsy-like woman. But Mr. Redcliffe, at once making him an imperative sign to ask no questions, said, "Let your wife take charge of this female, and surround her with all possible attentions. Let suitable apparel be provided for her—treat her as you would treat a guest who flourished a well-filled purse before your eyes—but beware how you or any one belonging to you question her impertinently!"

The landlord bowed—and at once summoned his wife, whom Jane accompanied with the docile

obedience of complete lucidity, as well as of a heart full of gratitude towards the author of this renewed kindness on her behalf.

"Now," said Mr. Redcliffe, "a word with you, landlord!"—and he beckoned the man into the parlour which he was occupying at the inn. "Have you the courage to accompany me," he inquired, "on a venture that will put one hundred pounds in your pocket?"

The landlord—who was a stout, powerfully built man, of about forty years of age—opened his eyes wide with astonishment; and then said, "A hundred pounds, sir? I have courage to do anything for such a reward."

"Then come with me," answered Redcliffe. "Procure a stout cord—breathe not a syllable to your wife—and the money will be yours. I will explain myself fully as we proceed."

But the landlord stood hesitating: he did not exactly know whether to believe that it was all right and straightforward or whether it were some lawless adventure into which his guest sought to drag him.

"A felon has escaped from the hands of justice," said Mr. Redcliffe quickly: "the Government has offered fifty pounds for his apprehension—the authorities of Liverpool a like sum—and all this reward shall be yours! Now will you accompany me?"

"Cheerfully, sir," answered the landlord, his hesitation vanishing in a moment: "and I beg your pardon——"

"Enough!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe. "Procure the cord—conceal it about your person—and follow me without delay. I shall walk slowly through the village in the direction of the churchyard."

"But would it not be better, sir," inquired the landlord, "to take pistols with us?"

"I have them," rejoined Mr. Redcliffe: and unlocking a mahogany case, he produced a pair of small double barrelled rifle pistols, which he at once secured about his person.

He then issued forth from the room; and leaving the inn, proceeded slowly along the street. In a few minutes he was joined by the landlord, who intimated that he had with him a cord which would effectually bind the miscreant's limbs when he should be captured. He carried in his hand a stout staff or bludgeon: but Mr. Redcliffe said to him, "We must take the man alive: it is not for us to anticipate the blow which justice has to deal."

"And if in self-defence?" said the landlord.

"That is different," replied Mr. Redcliffe.

"And pray who may this man be, sir?"

"You have heard of the dreadful murder at Liverpool several months back—you know probably that one of the assassins escaped——"

"What! the notorious Barney the Burker?" ejaculated the landlord.

"The very same," returned Redcliffe: "and doubtless you have seen him too. Know you the assistant of your sexton here?"

"Well," exclaimed the landlord, stopping suddenly short, "if I didn't always say that the fellow had the most hang-dog countenance——"

"Come quick!" exclaimed Redcliffe; "or another murder may be committed ere our object be accomplished."

They walked on together; and on coming within view of the old sexton's cottage, they perceived a light glimmering through one of the ground-floor windows. At that very instant the form of a man passed in front of that window, obscuring the light for a moment: and Redcliffe again said, "Come quick!"

The cottage stood in the midst of a little garden, separated by a low paling from the lane by which it was approached: the shed occupied by the Burker was in a yard at the back. The lane itself was bounded by a hedge, which ceased at the commencement of the paling;—and there, within the shade of that hedge, Mr. Redcliffe and the landlord paused to reconnoitre the premises. Some one was knocking at the door with his knuckles: they had no doubt it was the same person whom they had seen pass by the window—they suspected it might be the Burker—but they could not be sure, for there was a little portico formed with trellis-work and covered with jasmine, in the deep shade of which stood the person who was thus knocking at the cottage door.

The Burker however it was; and we will for the present follow him and his proceedings. His coat was buttoned around him; and beneath it he had a crowbar concealed. The fellow had thought to do his murderous work thus early in the night—for it was little more than half-past ten—in order that he might have many hours in which to place a considerable distance between himself and Woodbridge ere the foul deed should be discovered. As for Crazy Jane—if he found her not wandering in the neighbourhood after the accomplishment of the crime which he meditated, he would abandon his projects in respect to herself altogether, rather than waste valuable time and run additional risk by searching after her.

Barney the Burker knocked, as we have said, at Jonathan Carnabie's door. The old man was reading in his little parlour when the summons reached his ear; and taking up the light, he proceeded as far as the door—which he did not however open.

"Who is it?" he asked from within.

"It's me sir," replied the Burker; and his voice was heard by Mr. Redcliffe and the landlord—the latter of whom immediately recognising it (for he had on one occasion spoken to the man) intimated the same in a low hurried whisper to Mr. Redcliffe.

"Come," said this gentleman, also in a whispering tone, "let us creep stealthily along the paling:"—for he knew that if the fellow's suspicions were excited, he would at once turn and fly.

"And what do you want?" asked Jonathan Carnabie from within.

"There's a message just come down from the village," responded the Burker; "and the boy which brought it is a-waiting here to speak to you his-self."

"And how came you up at this hour?" inquired Jonathan, still without opening the door: not that the old man had any reason to suspect a sinister motive on the part of his assistant—but his long habit of self-seclusion, and perhaps the little circumstance that he really did possess a small hoard of gold, had rendered him particularly cautious.

"I didn't feel inclined to sleep," answered the Burker; "so I took a walk through the church-

yard to make sure there was no body-snatchers; and as I was a-coming back, I met this here little boy."

"All right!" answered Carnabie: and the door opening, the old man was discerned, carrying a candle in his hand.

The Burker at once pushed himself in: then there was a rush of footsteps immediately after him—the crow-bar dropped from beneath the coat which the miscreant, thus suddenly startled, had unbuttoned in readiness; and in the twinkling of an eye a pistol was levelled at his head, while in his ear resounded the terrible words, "Surrender, or you are a dead man!"

It was Mr. Redcliffe who had seized upon him with one hand, while with the other he presented the weapon. The landlord—who was either confused by the suddenness of the whole proceeding, or else whose vaunted courage became paralysed in a moment at the sight of the ferocious countenance of the Burker—fumbled to produce the cord from beneath his garments: but though close at his leader's heels, he did not render prompt succour in securing the villain. With one terrific how of rage the Burker burst from Mr. Redcliffe's grasp, at the same time dashing from his hand the pistol—which instantaneously exploded, without however accomplishing any mischief. The dilatory or dastard landlord was dashed violently to the ground, as the Burker sped past with the fury and power of a mad bull.

"Stop—or I fire! I have another pistol!" ejaculated Redcliffe, who had not been hurled down, but merely thrust violently against the door-post.

The Burker made no response—nor did he obey the threatening mandate; but on he rushed with a speed that was almost incredible. Mr. Redcliffe pursued him, calling the landlord to join likewise in the chase. Without waiting to see whether he were obeyed, Mr. Redcliffe darted forward, at the

same time drawing forth his remaining weapon, which he did not however immediately use. But finding that the assassin, goaded by his desperate circumstances, was fleeing more quickly than he was enabled to follow, he discharged one of the bullets of the double-barreled pistol, with the aim and intent of wounding the ruffian in the leg. The ball missed; and on sped Barney. The second bullet was sent flying after him: this likewise failed. But all of a sudden the river revealed itself in its quicksilver brightness to Mr. Redcliffe's view. He heard footsteps behind him—a glance thrown over his shoulder, showed him that the landlord was following—and he exclaimed, "Quick, quick! he is in our power!"

But the next moment the Burker plunged into the river. His dark form was seen for a moment struggling amidst the eddies which his leap had thus created; and then it disappeared from the view. A very little lower down, a row of trees skirted each bank, overhanging the river so far as to shut out the clear starlight, and thus throw all that portion of the stream for a couple of hundred yards into the deepest, blackest gloom. Redcliffe and the landlord hurried along the bank, straining their eyes to peep through the dense foliage and catch a glimpse if possible of the waters beneath—but all in vain. Neither heard they any sound like that of a struggling or battling form in those waters; and amidst that depth of gloom they ran to and fro along the bank within and beyond the range of the trees,—Redcliffe being ready at the first appearance of the Burker to spring in and grapple with him. But no farther trace was discovered of the murderer.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

THE FOUR SYRENS.

THE scene changes to the sumptuous establishment of Madame Angelique in London; and we must again introduce our readers to the apartment which communicated by means of the mirror-contrived door with the Frenchman's house adjoining.

In this room we shall find four beautiful girls, as on the first occasion when the reader was initiated in the mysteries of this temple of voluptuousness: but of these present four, *two* were new importations to the Frenchwoman's house of fashionable infamy. Armantine, the French girl, was still there: Linda, the German girl, was likewise still an inmate of the same place:—the other two have yet to be described. All four were exquisitely dressed in evening toilet: their charms were displayed—we can scarcely say to the utmost advantage, for *this* implies a consistency with that modesty without which beauty loses half its fascination: but those lovely contours of bust were exposed in a manner that left but little more to be revealed. And as if too by that which was originally a study, but which had now become a habit, the attitudes of those four girls were full of a voluptuous abandonment: so that if they had been sitting to an artist who sought to depict four different personifications of luxurious sensuousness, they could not possibly have chosen better positions—nor could better models have been selected.

Yet there was nothing of the absolute grossness of the ordinary houses of infamy, nor of the manner of their inmates, discernible in that room nor on the part of those four young women. The furniture was all sumptuous—luxurious too, even to the carrying-out of oriental ideas of such luxury: but no immodest pictures were suspended to the walls—it might have been a room in any palatial mansion the respectability of which was above the breath of scandal. Besides, there was an elegance of taste and an air of refinement presiding over the entire appointments of the room; while the sideboard was covered with the choicest wines and the most delicate confectionary, as well as a variety of fruits—but there was no eager rushing on the part of the young females to this sideboard; and the tempting refreshments remained there comparatively unheeded,—thus evidencing that the inmates of the room were accustomed to these and all other luxuries.

Then, as for the attitudes of the girls themselves, it is true that, as we have already said, they were replete with a voluptuous abandonment, and the charms of those lovely creatures were most meretriciously displayed. Still, even here there was a gloss of refinement over all—an elegant polish which showed that they had all been ladies once, in the common acceptance of the term; whatever name they merited now. The good-breeding which from their infancy was their's, was discernible in their manners: there was nothing improper in their discourse—nor had their looks the bold hardihood of a gross and vulgar harlotry. For a scene of iniquity, it was certainly one of the most fascinating that could possibly be presented to the view; and certainly the best composed and the best appointed in all its details within the limits of the modern Babylon. But then Madame Angelique had ever taken great pride in what she was presumptuous enough to style the "respectability" of her establishment; and as she treated the young women like ladies, and enforced the same demeanour on the part of the female domesties towards them, they on their own part had a certain pride in maintaining a suitable decorum of conversation and manners amongst themselves.

We will now go a little more into detail. Linda, the German girl, was reclining upon an Ottoman, negligently toying with her fair tresses,—her naked arms and almost completely bared bosom exhibiting the stainless white of a lovely complexion. There was an unspeakable langour about her entire form; and her sensuous abandonment of attitude was displayed with all its most ravishingly dangerous characteristics. Armantine, the French girl—with her dark glossy hair arranged in bands, and she herself perhaps the least meretriciously attired of the whole four—looking, too, more sweetly and pensively lovely, though lovelier as to actual charms she was not, for it were impossible to award the palm to any one in particular,—Armantine, we say, was placed in a settee near the German girl, with whom she principally conversed.

In a large cushioned chair, languishingly reclined the third of these syrens,—a full-grown beauty, though still quite youthful, and with all the freshness of youth blooming upon her rich

luxuriant charms. There was an air of sensuous indolence about this girl which was different from that of the German: it was the waking dreaminess of a luxurious temperament that appeared to be softly abandoning itself to voluptuous reveries. She was a native of England, and had only recently passed from the keeping of a nobleman,—who first seduced her from a genteel and happy home,—into Madame Angelique's fashionable temple of infamy. But no remorse had she on account of the home she had left—or at least, if such a feeling were really in her bosom, she displayed it not: for blended with that air of sensuous lassitude—an air which might be described as luxurious wantonness at rest—was an expression of listless, placid contentment. She had light hair and blue eyes: milk and roses combined to form her complexion: she had full moist luscious lips—beautiful teeth—and a form which without being exuberant to fatness, was full, fleshy, but of perfectly symmetrical proportions. She answered to the Christian name of Marion.

Upon the back of the chair in which Marion thus negligently reclined—or rather, in which she reposed—leant a tall slender girl, of sylphid shape, and with such exquisite elegance and grace in all her attitudes and movements, that in the days of her virtue she must have been a veritable star in the midst of the brightest galaxy that ever thronged in a ball-room. She had brown hair, remarkably luxuriant in its mass of silken softness, and with a rich natural gloss upon it. Her features were perfectly faultless: her age did not exceed seventeen: she also was an English girl—and she bore the beautiful name of Eglantine. Alas, that one endowed with such loveliness of form and with such mental accomplishments as she possessed—bearing too a name so sweet to be murmured by the lips of pure, chaste, and honourable love—alas, that she should have fallen from virtue's pinnacle and sunk into this degradation, gilded though it were!

Linda, Armantine, Marion, and Eglantine were together in their sumptuous apartment, between nine and ten o'clock in the evening; and they were conversing on various topics, just as four ladies might do in their own drawing-room. Presently the mirror-contrived door opened: the four syrens turned their eyes slowly to see who was about to enter,—when an individual who was a stranger to them all, made his appearance. He was flashily dressed, but had a vulgar look; and as he took off his hat, he made a most ridiculous attempt at a bow to the young women; so that Armantine and Eglantine could not help laughing—while Linda and Marion so far exerted themselves in their luxurious indolence as to sit up and survey him with more attention.

"Good evening, ladies," said this individual, closing the mirror-door behind him, and advancing with an impudent leering smirk towards those whom he thus addressed. "Don't be alarmed. Perhaps you know me by name—and perhaps you don't. So if the old lady"—thus irreverently, as the girls thought, alluding to Madame Angelique—"hasn't done me the honour of mentioning me to you before, I may as well announce myself as Mr. Isaac Shadbolt. Honest Ike, as my friends Sir Richard Mayne and Colonel Rowan call me!"

"Why, I do believe," whispered Marion to her companions, "he alludes to the Commissioners of Police. When I lived with Lord Beltinge, I frequently heard those names mentioned."

"Well, yes, Miss," said Mr. Shadbolt, whose ears were uncommonly keen, and who had caught a portion of that whisper,—"the gentlemen *are* the Commissioners of Police; and I have the honour to serve under them. Not one of your common vulgar policemen, you know—but a sort of subaltern—what an Ensign or Lieutenant is in a regiment in comparison with the Colonel."

It was tolerably easy to perceive that Mr. Shadbolt had been drinking—not merely because his countenance was flushed, his speech was rather thick, and his gait a trifle unsteady—but likewise because the hitherto delicately perfumed atmosphere of the apartment had become impregnated, on this individual's entrance, with an odour of rum, as if he had dropped into two or three wine-vaults in his way, previous to making the present call.

"And pray what do you want, sir?" inquired Marion, now abandoning her voluptuous indolence as much as it was in her sensuously languishing nature to throw it off;—"what *do* you want?" she repeated: for having recently come from beneath aristocratic protection, she was the first to resent the vulgar intrusion.

"Did you ask me, Miss, what I would take to drink?" said Mr. Shadbolt, with police-court ease and station-house familiarity. "I have got a *detective* eye for whatever's good: trust honest Ike Shadbolt for *that!*"—and then he burst out into a loud guffaw at the witticism borrowed from his professional avocations, but the humour of which was lost to the young ladies, who were now all four full of indignation, surprise, and disgust.

Mr. Shadbolt however, nothing abashed, advanced towards the sideboard, and deliberately filled a tumbler with claret—for it was the habit of this exceedingly independent gentleman scornfully to eschew small glasses: and having slowly poured the somewhat copious libation down his throat, he gave a long sigh of pleasure. Then, having thus refreshed himself internally, he relieved his amatory feelings by nodding with a familiar leer at Marion—blowing a kiss from the tips of his fingers to Linda—smirking at Armantine—and extending his arms invitingly towards Eglantine. The young ladies, however, relished these pantomimic displays as little as might be: and they exchanged amongst themselves fresh looks of indignation and disgust. Mr. Shadbolt only laughed; and now with a huge slice of cake in one hand, and a quarter of a pine-apple in the other, he leant against the side-board, feeding deliberately and still bestowing his glances of tender familiarity on the four houris.

"This is too disgusting!" said Marion. "Eglantine dear, you are nearest—ring the bell——hard! hard!"

"Do if you like," said Mr. Shadbolt: "but depend upon it the old dowager"—thus again irreverently alluding to Madame Angelique—"will give me a most welcome reception. Why, Lord love you all, you sweet creatures! how do you think I could be here in any possible way unless I was one of the privileged? And where is not honest Ike Shadbolt welcome, I should just like for to know?"

Miss Eglantine,—thinking there must be more

or less truth in the man's words, having the term "police" still ringing ominously in her ear, and afraid of angering one who made himself as completely at home as if he had a conscious right to do so,—forbore from pulling the bell; and whispered to Marion, "Had we not better see what he really wants? Perhaps he will explain himself? M. Bertin would scarcely have let him up unless he had full authority from madame."

"Come, sir," said Marion, authoritatively, "explain."

"An explanation of my conduct is quickly given, my dears," said Mr. Shadbolt; "and all the quicker too, since I see that with regular female curiosity you are all four burning to know what brings your humble servant and ever faithful admirer to this here saloon. There are several reasons. In the first place, I knew very well I should have the pleasure—or at least stand the chance, of meeting some of the sweetest young creatures in all England. In the second place, I knew that the claret was super-excellent and the port stunning. In the third place, I had an eye to the cake and fruit. And in the fourth place, my dears, I have a little private business of a very particular character with the amiable old dowager."

The girls could scarcely repress a smile at the consummate impudence—the cool free-and-easy independence of Mr. Isaac Shadbolt; and even the proud Marion suffered her moist red lips to part sufficiently to reveal the brilliancy of her teeth. Mr. Shadbolt continued to leer familiarly at the syrens, while he demolished the cake and the pine-apple; and then he helped himself to another tumbler full of wine.

"And now," he said, "that I've refreshed myself a bit, I should take it as civil if either of you young ladies would just show me where I shall find the old dowager."

"We will ring for a servant," said Eglantine, now once more extending her snowy, beautifully modelled arm towards the bell-pull.

"Stop, my dear!" exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt: "it is not worth while to trouble the slaveys—it would only throw the old lady into a flutter if we were to use so much ceremony, because she knows who I am. Just take the trouble to show me the way yourself; and if we do happen to pass through a dark passage together, I won't snatch a kiss—— Oh, no! not I indeed!"—and then Mr. Shadbolt was lost for the next half-minute in a series of nods, winks, and amatory leers.

Eglantine consulted Marion with a glance; and the latter said in a loud haughty tone, "This scene must positively end, my dear. Ring the bell, and have done with it."

"Perhaps I had better not," whispered Eglantine: "it might only annoy and frighten madame, as this man has already intimated:"—then hastening towards Shadbolt, she said, "Come—follow me."

The detective-officer, bowing after his own free-and-easy fashion to the other three young ladies, accompanied Miss Eglantine,—who conducted him to Madame Angelique's boudoir, taking very good care however to keep sufficiently in advance so as to avoid any practical familiarity which Mr. Shadbolt might in his amatory playfulness think fit to exhibit. Madame Angelique was alone in her luxuriously furnished room: the detective-officer was introduced thither; and Eglantine flitted back to the saloon, to communicate to her companions how startled and dismayed the mistress of the establishment looked when Mr. Shadbolt entered the boudoir.

And such indeed was the case. A cold tremor swept through the form of the Frenchwoman, whose conscience for some time past had been so uneasy, and who constantly experienced a sensation as if some fearful calamity would suddenly explode storm-like upon her head. The detective bowed with the air of one who had no necessity to await a welcome greeting, but who felt that he exercised an influence, or indeed an authority, which would ensure him a most civil reception, no matter what the real feeling of the mistress of the house might be.

"Sit down, Mr. Shadbolt—pray be seated," said Madame Angelique, as soon as she had sufficiently recovered from the first shock of terror to be enabled to give utterance to a word: but still her limbs were all trembling, and her voice was full of a nervous trepidation. "I thought—I thought—that is, you led me to believe—that—that it would be a long, long time——"

"Before you saw my beautiful visage again?" added Mr. Shadbolt, with his wonted flippancy. "Well, I believe, ma'am," he continued, as he leisurely smoothed down the ruffled nap of his hat with his coat-sleeve, "I did intimate something of the sort——"

"Yes—and you know," interjected Madame Angelique, eagerly, "I was to give you a hundred a-year—and I am sure, Mr. Shadbolt——But perhaps you have got bad news? perhaps something else has turned up?"

"Well, ma'am, I am sorry to say that such is the case," rejoined the officer. "There isn't a more delicate-minded man in all the world than honest Ike Shadbolt—or one who has more regard for a lady's feelings: I am as tender as a chicken in that respect——But there's persons higher in authority than even Ike Shadbolt."

"I understand!" said Madame Angelique, with a shudder: "you mean the Commissioners of Police?"

"Well, ma'am, I did just allude to those gentlemen," answered the detective. "Now, the long and short of the matter is, they have received another intimation about your house——"

"Oh, Mr. Shadbolt!" cried the Frenchwoman, wringing her hands in despair; "I offered to wall up the unfortunate door—or to give up my business in respect to the young ladies, and attend only to the millinery——or even——But you told me so positively that I need do nothing of the sort!"

"And I only told you ma'am," interrupted Shadbolt, "what I thought at the time. But circumstances may alter—and they *have* altered. Immediately after my former visit, I reported to the Commissioners that you had faithfully promised to do all you have just been saying; and they appeared satisfied. I thought that it would all end pleasantly—that they would leave the matter in my hands—and that as long as I made no additional report, they would take it for granted I was keeping a look-out on you, and you were doing all that was necessary. But behold you! this afternoon I was summoned to Scotland

Yard—that's the office of the Commissioners, you know—and was desired to see how you were getting on, but without holding the slightest communication with you. Now, don't flurry yourself, ma'am——you'll see I'm acting a friendly part towards you: but the truth is, the Commissioners have been in private communication with the parochial authorities—and—and—these authorities are going to—to—prosecute you. So I'm come to get evidence——"

A half-stifled shriek came from the lips of the wretched Frenchwoman; and as she fell back in her chair as if she were about to go off in a fit, Mr. Shadbolt very considerately filled a glass with wine and held it to her lips: but as she only shook her head impatiently, and waved him off, he drank it himself—coolly observing "that it was a pity it should be wasted."

"What, in the name of heaven, am I to do?" cried Madame Angelique, wringing her hands. "Do advise me, Mr. Shadbolt! You will find I shall be grateful! What am I to do? Shall I send off the young ladies at once? shall I shut up the house? I have already thought of all this—but——"

"Look here, ma'am," said the officer; "be calm and cool—we will discuss the matter quietly and comfortably—and I dare say you can get out of the business pleasantly enough in the long run."

"Ah!" said Madame Angelique, with a long sigh of relief: "I thought you would not leave me to be sent to prison——to be ruined——"

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated Shadbolt. "Answer me a question or two. I suppose you are pretty warm—I mean you have got plenty of money? and if you was to cut this business you wouldn't quite have to go into the work-house? Come, ma'am—tell the truth," added the officer, seeing that she hesitated how to reply: "tell the truth, I say, if you want the advice of honest Ike Shadbolt."

"Well, then," responded the Frenchwoman, "I certainly could retire from business with a tolerable competency if I chose: and indeed I had some thoughts of doing so after your previous visit. Only——"

"Only what?" inquired Shadbolt.

"Only I fancied," added Madame Angelique, "that I was the object of such bitter persecution on the part of that lady at Bayswater whom you and I spoke about, that she would pursue me wherever I went—and that it therefore little mattered where I might be or what I did—for that it would always come to the same thing——I mean that I should ever have to stand on the defensive against her."

While Madame Angelique was thus speaking, Shadbolt passed his hand slowly across his forehead with the air of one who was reflecting in a sort of half-bewilderment, and who was striving to collect his ideas.

"What lady at Bayswater?" he at length said.

"Did you not tell me the last time you were here," inquired Madame Angelique quickly, "that the information was given to the Commissioners by an Indian lady——"

"If I did then, I was drunk," interrupted Shadbolt. "Ah! by the bye, I *do* recollect now, that you pressed me upon the point. You had got some crotchet in your head; and perhaps I thought it best at the time to leave you in the dark—or more likely still, I was really in total ignorance myself——"

"Then it is not the Lady Indora who is persecuting me?" exclaimed the Frenchwoman eagerly.

"I don't believe the lady you speak of has anything to do in the business," interjected Shadbolt. "The truth is, a lawyer in Bedford Row, Holborn—one Coleman by name—but who has a private house in this parish, is at the bottom of the whole affair; and from all I can learn, he has addressed the Commissioners most seriously on the subject. Indeed, there's no use disguising the fact—he says he is employed for a wealthy client of his who also lives in the parish, but who chooses to keep in the back-ground."

"Mr. Coleman, a solicitor?" said Madame Angelique, musing reflectively: "I never heard of him. But then it is true gentlemen often come to my house under feigned names——"

"And gather a great many particulars," added Mr. Shadbolt significantly. "Now, you see, ma'am, I am dealing candidly with you. The truth is, the Commissioners know that you are not very particular how you entice young girls away from their homes, or even have them carried off by force. They also know that a certain Lettice Rodney who was tried at Liverpool, belonged to your establishment——"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Madame Angelique.

"They know too," continued Shadbolt, "that at the time when she got into all her troubles, she was going to Ireland on your business—to wheedle back a certain Eveleen O'Brien——"

"Then Lettice must have betrayed everything!" cried the Frenchwoman bitterly.

"I can't say who betrayed it," proceeded Shadbolt: "all I know is, that this is the information given to the Commissioners by Mr. Coleman the lawyer. But there's more still to come. It is known you have agents in different parts of the country to look out for young girls and pick them up for your customers who may themselves reside in the country. Now, what was that affair about a certain Isabella Vincent, who was carried off from a farm-house somewhere in Kent, down to Ramsgate?"

"Heavens! what, is this known too?" cried the Frenchwoman. "Well, it was certainly done by agents of mine——"

"Well, then, you see that it *is* known," proceeded Shadbolt. "And then there's something else too. Ah! and now I know why you talk of a lady at Bayswater! Did you not have some young person—a Miss Ashton, I think—carried off from a villa down in that neighbourhood?—and she was rescued by a young nobleman——"

"All this is true!" exclaimed Madame Angelique: and then in a musing manner she added, "But if the Lady Indora gave the information about Christina Ashton, how could she possibly know all the other circumstances?"

"You may be quite satisfied," answered Shadbolt, "that this Indian lady of whom you are talking has nothing to do with the business: so it is no use running your head any longer against that post. I tell you that it all comes from Coleman the lawyer, who is acting for a rich client be-

hind the scenes. Well, you see, ma'am, these circumstances I have been mentioning—and others that are known to the Commissioners—have made the matter serious enough. Your enemies are too powerful—and they will break up your establishment for you, if you don't break it up for yourself. You say you are pretty warm: why not retire at once? Go to France."

Madame Angelique looked bewildered; and in the confusion of her thoughts she was led to confess that on account of certain incidents with regard to the decoying of young women from France, Belgium, and some of the German States, it would be very inconvenient, or even perilous, for her to set foot on the Continent at all.

"Well then, remain in England," ejaculated Mr. Shadbolt. "Now I will show you how the matter stands. There is to be a prosecution, if my report shows that there is evidence to support it. Of course the Commissioners think that I come here only as a spy, and not to give you any private advice. They imagine that whatever I told them after my first visit here, was only gleaned in the course of conversation—and not on account of any private understanding betwixt you and me. They believe they can rely upon me: and so they have sent me here again on this present occasion. Now, I need not make my report for a day or two—I can pretend that I had other business—or that I could not obtain admission. To-morrow therefore you can dismiss the girls——"

"And give up the establishment!" added Madame Angelique, in a decided tone: for her mind was now relieved in more ways than one, and she was enabled to breathe more freely than she had done for some time past.

"Why break up the millinery part of the establishment?" inquired Shadbolt. "I did not mean that."

"The millinery branch," responded the Frenchwoman, "is nothing in comparison with the other. Though I have plenty of custom, yet what with long credit, and some of the highest families never thinking of paying at all—what with the expenses too——Besides, Mr. Shadbolt," added the milliner, in a tone of confidence, "half my lady-customers would leave me the moment this house ceased to be one of accommodation. So it is decided!—I give up everything, and I retire on my means. As for the girls, I know where to place them at once——And," added the Frenchwoman to herself, "I can turn a last penny by each of them."

"Well then, retire!" exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt; "and when you are out of business, I will show you how to make more money than ever you have done while in it."

"You?" ejaculated Madame Angelique.

"Yes, I—even I, honest Ike Shadbolt! But no matter now; you shall know all when the time comes. Go and settle down in some comfortable place—some pretty little villa on the outskirts—and make yourself as happy as the day is long. I shall come back here in the course of the week, and shall then report to the Commissioners that the establishment is broken up—that the girls are all gone—and that the tailor next door has bricked up the means of communication between the two houses. So there will be an end of prosecutions and all other unpleasantness. And now, my dear madam, if you think all this advice of mine, and all the good I am going to do you, is worth anything——"

"Oh, to be sure," ejaculated Madame Angelique, who, though she comprehended all the selfishness of Shadbolt's disposition, was nevertheless but too glad to secure his good offices.

A liberal gratuity was therefore placed in his hand: and he took his departure,—the Frenchwoman not thinking it necessary to allow him to retrace his way through the saloon, but ringing the bell for the liveried footman to show him out by the front door of her own house.

About ten minutes afterwards the Duke of Marchmont was announced.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

THE MILLINER AND THE DUKE.

THE Duke, whose countenance was pale and careworn, and who by his looks had evidently suffered much of late, endeavoured to put on the smile of gracious affability as he entered the luxurious apartment where Madame Angelique was seated. It occurred to him that she bowed somewhat more distantly than was her wont—or at least with an air of greater independance, if not actually commingled with coldness. He threw himself upon a seat—glanced at her for a moment, as if to assure himself whether there were really any studied change in her manner—and then he said, "Well, my able friend, assistant, and accomplice, have you thought of any fresh project——"

"I have just decided, my lord," responded Madame Angelique, "upon a most serious and important one."

"Indeed!" ejaculated the Duke eagerly. "And it is this that gives you such an air of mingled gravity and confidence? It is one, therefore, that will rid you—or perhaps I may say *us*—for ever from all fear of vindictive persecution at the hands of Indora?"

"I no longer fear her persecutions, my lord," rejoined the Frenchwoman: and her tone was now unmistakeably cold, while her manner was stiff.

"I do not understand you!" exclaimed the Duke, not knowing what to think. "Has anything happened to Indora? has anything been done? Have you in your astuteness devised something better than the aid of Sagoonah's dagger or a reptile from the Zoological Gardens?"

"Heaven be thanked," cried the Frenchwoman, "that neither the steel blade nor the serpent did the work of death! My conscience is at least not burthened with that crime."

"Then what do you mean?" asked the nobleman, now completely bewildered, and alarmed likewise by whatsoever appeared strangely sinister in the otherwise incomprehensible look, tone, and manner of Madame Angelique. "What is this project on which you have decided?"

"To break up my establishment altogether—retire into a pleasant little villa—and live in comfort for the rest of my days, apart from all intrigues and the perils thereof."

The Duke of Marchmont was astounded. As the reader is aware, he was in mortal dread of the

Princess Indora: he had the most cogent reasons for destroying her life, so that he might silence her for ever; and here was the hitherto useful and willing agent of whom he had made a tool for the purpose of carrying out his fell design,—here she was, we say, suddenly slipping out of his hands!

"You surely cannot be serious?" he at length faltered out: "you would not abandon a business—pardon me, an avocation—which is so lucrative?"

"And which makes me the dupe of others!" rejoined Madame Angelique, with emphatic tone and significant look.

"What mean you?" inquired Marchmont. "Your words seem pointed—and yet to one who has always been your friend——"

"You have paid me, my lord, for the services which I have rendered," answered Madame Angelique; "and on that score we are quits. But you have endeavoured to render me your instrument in the accomplishment of a deed from which I now recoil with horror,—yes, and even with wonder that I could have ever contemplated it! With all the arts of sophistry you led me to believe that I incurred the most terrific dangers at Indora's hands——"

"And had you not the proof?" inquired the Duke, vainly endeavouring to conceal the bitter vexation and even the terror which he experienced. "Did not an agent of the police——"

"Yes—he came, certainly; but I was altogether mistaken as to the origin of his visit. In one word, my Lord Duke, the Lady Indora has nothing to do with this proceeding on the part of the Commissioners of Police: it all emanates from some wealthy person in the back-ground, who acts through the medium of his attorney, Mr. Coleman."

"Coleman—Coleman?" said the Duke, thus repeating the name in a musing tone. "Surely I have heard it before—and somewhat recently too. Coleman? Ah! I recollect!—it is that lawyer who has been advancing Armytage such considerable sums of money!"

"Do you then know anything of this Mr. Coleman, my lord?" inquired the Frenchwoman. "But it matters not——My mind is made up how to act. I am this evening more at ease than for a long time past I have been; and never—never will I again suffer myself to be beguiled by the representations of one who was all the time endeavouring to serve his own purposes."

"You allude to me," ejaculated the Duke, assuming an air of indignation; "and you wrong me! I thought you in danger from that quarter——"

"Well, well, my lord, we will not dispute the point," interrupted Madame Angelique: and then she ironically added, "I have no doubt your Grace will now congratulate me on having acquired the certainty that I am no longer in any peril from that quarter?"

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Marchmont; "if it really is so. But beware, my good friend, how you suffer yourself to be lulled into a false security. It is at such times that the blow falls heaviest——"

"Thank you, my lord," interrupted the milliner, "I am fully prepared to meet all contingencies of that sort. To-morrow I dismiss the girls—or rather I find them protectors, as their kind and excellent friend who stands in the light of their mother ought to do."

Madame Angelique chuckled at her own disgusting levity—and the Duke for an instant bit his lip with vexation. He saw that the milliner was resolute in the plan she had proclaimed: he saw too how hopeless it was to attempt to enlist her services any farther in the prosecution of his designs; and he likewise felt how necessary it was to keep on friendly terms with her. A seal must be placed upon her lips in respect to all that had recently occurred; and though for her own sake she would keep silent on those points, yet it by no means suited the Duke's interests that she should speak disparagingly of him in any other sense.

"Well, my dear madam," he accordingly said, assuming his blandest tone and his most affable look, "I do indeed congratulate you on this change in your position—I am glad you have reason to feel so confident in respect to the Lady Indora. And now, as you are about to retire into private life, if there be anything I can do——"

"Yes—there is something," responded Madame Angelique. "The four girls must be comfortably provided for: I mean to leave off business with a good character—and those charmers of mine must not go forth into the world to proclaim what I have been. So little has actually transpired in respect to the true character of this house, that the public in general will give me credit for being a respectable milliner who is retiring on a fortune legitimately obtained."

"To be sure, my dear madam!" ejaculated Marchmont; "you will keep your own counsel with respect to the past—you will provide for the girls, so as to seal their lips; and those friends who have so long patronised your establishment—myself amongst the number—will of course do the best to sustain your respectability by their good report."

"I expect nothing less at their hands," answered Madame Angelique; "and I purpose to test the sincerity of the friendship of four of my principal patrons. To begin therefore with your Grace, I give you your choice of the four young ladies in the saloon."

"Commend me to Eglantine!" exclaimed Marchmont, who at once saw the necessity of yielding to that which was in reality a command on the part of the Frenchwoman. "To-morrow I will take handsome apartments somewhere for Eglantine—I will let you know the address in the course of the day—and she can then remove thither."

"Eglantine must prove an exception from the choice," answered Madame Angelique. "I had forgotten at the moment that I have a particular way of disposing of her. Either of the other three——"

"It is impossible, my dear madam," interrupted the Duke, "that I can take either Armantine or Linda, who have been so long beneath your roof, and who are so well known amongst all your patrons! I should be laughed at—ridiculed——"

"Then why not Marion?" demanded the Frenchwoman. "And now I bethink me, I can place Armantine and Linda equally as well as I can Eglantine. Therefore, my lord, it must be Marion."

"But, my dear Madame Angelique!" said the Duke; "in the first place I believe that Marion dislikes me—you remember I have complained to you of her refusal——"

"Mere coyness on her part—or else artifice and stratagem to render herself all the more acceptable when she might choose to surrender."

"But there is another reason!" exclaimed the Duke.

"Is this your friendship?" cried Madame Angelique, with a great show of indignation, and half starting from her seat.

"Do not be angry!—we were but discussing the point——"

"And it is no longer open for discussion. Take Marion or not, as you think fit," continued the Frenchwoman: "but if you refuse, I shall know what value to set upon the friendship of your Grace."

Marchmont bit his lip almost till the blood came: Madame Angelique's look was resolutely decisive; and not daring to quarrel with her, he affected to laugh,—saying, "Well, well, I suppose, like all ladies, you must have your own way! So let it be the particular beauty whom you have thus allotted to me."

"Be it so: it is settled, my lord," replied Madame Angelique. "I have not the slightest doubt that Marion, who has been under the protection of an Earl, will feel proud in the long run to own the tender friendship of a Duke."

There was a slight accent of sarcasm in the milliner's tone: for she was avenging herself, as far as she thought fit, for the conduct of Marchmont in having duped her into becoming the instrument of his own designs, incomprehensible to the French woman though they were, in respect to Indora. The Duke, comprehending Madame Angelique's meaning, again bit his lip with vexation: but bowing to conceal it, he issued from the room.

On leaving the milliner's house, the Duke of Marchmont walked slowly along the street, plunged in a deep and painful reverie. He had numerous sources of bitter vexation as well as of alarm; and amongst the former the arrangement just made—or rather just enforced, in respect to Marion, was not the least. He knew that she had been the mistress of the Earl of Beltinge; and he by no means relished the idea of taking up with that nobleman's discarded paramour. The expense of keeping Marion entered not for a moment into his consideration: for he was wealthy enough to gratify any such fantasy if he had the inclination. But even in the sphere of vice and immorality, the haughty tone of aristocratic feeling prevails; and Marchmont winced at the idea that he, a Duke, should be compelled to take under his protection the cast-off mistress of an Earl. Were she the discarded paramour of a King, a Prince, or even a Royal Duke, it would have been different. Such was the sensitiveness of a man who hesitated not to make a familiar companion of a woman like Madame Angelique, the keeper of a fashionable house of infamy,—a man too who would have plunged himself into crime to rid his path of an enemy, like Indora, who, as he had reason to believe, was by some means or another threatening his security.

As the Duke of Marchmont was continuing his way slowly, and in deep brooding thoughtfulness, along the street, he encountered some one who suddenly addressed him by name;—and looking up, he beheld the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

"My lord, I greet you," said that unprincipled individual, in a tone of familiarity.

"Ah! so you have returned from Paris?" observed the Duke, somewhat coldly.

"Yes—where I am sorry to say," responded Stanhope, "I fell in with persons who were cleverer than myself; and the consequence is I am as completely cleared out as ever an unfortunate devil was. I was just thinking to whom I could apply for a little friendly succour, when behold! fortune throws me in the way of your Grace."

"Then your pocket, I presume, is empty?" said the Duke, speaking slowly and in a musing manner: for he was revolving in his mind something that had just occurred to him.

"So empty," rejoined Stanhope, "that the introduction of such a thing as fifty guineas into that pocket of mine would be a veritable god-send. May I anticipate that for old acquaintance sake ——and you must remember, my lord, that if that affair with her Grace down at Oaklands ended in failure——"

"It was not your fault, I admit," returned the Duke: "but you must also recollect that I gave you a liberal reward. Enough, however, on that point! I think I can do something for you now. What would you say if I were to introduce you to-morrow to a handsome suite of apartments—a beautiful girl already installed there as the genius of the scene—and with an account opened at a banker's in your name to the extent of five hundred pounds?"

"I should say, my lord," replied Stanhope, "that it was a truly ducal manner in getting rid of a mistress of whom your Grace is tired—and that I am so overwhelmed by the favour I at once accept it."

"Then it is a bargain," said Marchmont; "and here is an earnest thereof," he added, slipping his purse into Stanhope's hand. "Come to me to-morrow evening——But no! do not make your appearance in Belgrave Square——Dine with me at the Clarendon Hotel at seven o'clock—and after our wine I will conduct you to the little paradise where a houri's arms will be open to receive you."

"I shall be punctual, my lord," answered Wilson Stanhope. "But one word! Is not this great favour which you are showing me, the prelude to something else?"

"What mean you?" inquired Marchmont: but the tone in which the question was put, convinced Stanhope that his surmise was correct.

"Let me speak frankly, my lord," he said. "I asked for fifty pounds—and you proffer me five hundred. Is this really nothing more than a recompense for taking your cast-off mistress——"

"On my soul, she is no mistress of mine!" interrupted the Duke. "I have seen her—I have joked with her—but never beyond such companionship has any familiarity been permitted by her. I have endeavoured——But enough! Suffice it for you to know that she has been the mistress of Beltinge—that she is now at Madame Angelique's—and that to-morrow she will be in handsome apartments, ready to receive you."

"Good, my lord!" ejaculated Stanhope. "But

still I think there is something that lies beyond all this. You require my services in another way—and you are giving me the retaining fee?"

"And if it be so?" said the Duke pointedly.

"You will find me ready and willing as before. Only let me know at once, that I may shape my arrangements accordingly."

"Then shape them," answered the Duke, "according to the impression you have received—and perhaps I may be more explicit to-morrowevening."

With these words Marchmont hastened away: but scarcely had he entered the next street, when he beheld Mr. Armytage proceeding slowly a little way in front of him. The Duke immediately overtook him: but ere he spoke a word, he caught a sufficient glimpse of his countenance to indicate that the speculator was occupied in no very agreeable reflections.

"I am afraid the world goes not well with you, Travers?" began the Duke.

"Travers?" echoed Armytage, starting: "how imprudent you are, my lord."

"I forgot," said the Duke: "it was indeed imprudent. But is my surmise correct? does the world still go indifferently with you? I need however scarcely ask," added his Grace, with a slight accent of vexation, "for you did not keep faith with me, Armytage—though I plainly told you that it would inconvenience me seriously if you were to fail."

"And perhaps I have been inconvenienced still more?" said Armytage gruffly.

"It was not altogether well of you," resumed the Duke. "Upwards of five weeks have elapsed since you borrowed that last sum of twenty-five thousand pounds, with the assurance that in a few days you would be enabled to return it, as by taking up certain bills your credit would be good for fifty thousand. Was not that the way in which you put the matter to me?"

"I daresay it was, my lord," replied Armytage, in a manner much less respectful than he was wont to observe towards his patrician patron.

"I suppose that Mr. Coleman—the gentleman whom you mentioned—disappointed you?" proceeded the Duke, adopting a more conciliatory tone than at first. "If it were so, there is certainly some excuse."

Armytage continued silent as he walked in seeming moodiness by the Duke of Marchmont's side along the street.

"Yes—there would be an excuse," continued his Grace: "and therefore I could make allowances for you. But who is this Mr. Coleman?"

"A solicitor. Your lordship knows it already," rejoined Armytage: "I have told you so."

"And did he fly from his word?" inquired the Duke.

Again Armytage was silent—but only for a few instants; and then he said, "To tell your Grace the truth, Mr. Coleman did *not* fly from his word: he advanced me the money——yes, every farthing of it!" added Zoe's father, as if with the bitterness of desperation.

"And you do not mean me to understand that you have lost it all?" exclaimed Marchmont in dismay. "Why, money appears to melt out of your pocket as quickly as in former times it was wont to pour into it!"—then, as the thought struck his Grace, he said, "By heaven, Armytage, I am afraid that you gamble?"

"Yes—gamble as some of the highest and wealthiest in the City of London gamble!" replied the speculator,—"not as you noblemen and gentlemen gamble at the West End in such places as these:"—and he glanced towards a flood of light streaming forth from the portals of a splendid club-house they were passing.

"You mean on the Stock Exchange?" said the Duke inquiringly.

"I mean on the Stock Exchange," replied Armytage curtly.

They continued walking on together in silence for a few minutes,—Armytage with his looks bent downward in moody reverie—the Duke of Marchmont in anxious thought; for he was now sorry that he had addressed the speculator at all, inasmuch as he feared lest the interview should end by the demand for another loan.

"And is that enormous sum of fifty thousand pounds," he at length asked,—"which you obtained from Mr. Coleman—is it all gone?"

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Armytage, clutching the Duke's arm quickly and violently, and looking up into his face with a countenance which, as the nearest gas-lamp streamed upon it, appeared absolutely ghastly. "Surely that question of yours was not prophetic of evil? No, no—I should be utterly, hopelessly ruined!"

"Then what, in the name of heaven, have you done?" inquired the Duke: "and why are you in this dreadfully perturbed state of mind?"

"Because I have ventured the whole of that sum upon a speculation which will either in one day—in one hour—I might almost say in one moment—give me a fortune——or on the other hand,"—he gulped for a moment, and then added gaspingly—"or beggar me!"

"How mad! how foolish!" exclaimed Marchmont.

"Yes—mad and foolish," responded Armytage, with almost the petulance of retort, "if it had been my own money with which I was speculating: but it was *not!* And therefore what had I to do but to make the best of it? It was neck-or-nothing—riches once more or utter ruin!"

"And when will the result be known?" inquired the Duke.

"Exactly one month hence," replied Armytage.

"One month? And wherefore are you so desponding and mistrustful now?"

"Because—because," answered the speculator, "I have just been reading the evening paper—and the intelligence is unfavourable for the particular way in which my money is laid out. Nevertheless, things may take a turn!—to-morrow their aspect may be as favourable as to-day it is gloomy. But, Oh! what a life to lead, my lord!—at one time exultant with hope—at another cast down into the vortex of despair—yesterday dreaming of countless riches, to-day recoiling in horror from the presence of the grovelling mendicant who crawls past, with the hideous presentiment that his condition is a type of what mine may shortly be!"

There was another pause for some minutes, during which the Duke and the speculator continued walking on together; and the silence was suddenly broken by the latter—who said in a milder and more respectful tone than he had hitherto adopted, "I am afraid your Grace must think I spoke rudely, and even brutally just now: but such was the state of my mind——"

"Say no more upon the subject," interrupted Marchmont, who perhaps had his own reasons for not dealing harshly with the speculator. "I can make allowances for you. Your daughter—have you heard from her lately?"

"Ah, my daughter! and young Meredith!" ejaculated Armytage, with a renewal of the petulant bitterness of his tone: "it is this that drives me mad! I care not so much for myself—although it would be shocking enough for a man who has seen such wealth and raised himself to such a position, to sink down into poverty! Ah! you know not all——"

"Tell me everything, Armytage," said the Duke: not that he experienced any veritable friendly interest in the man's affairs, but he wished to ascertain the precise position wherein he stood, so that he might thereby measure the amount of chance there was of any fresh appeals being made to his own purse.

"Your Grace is probably aware," replied Armytage, "that when Lord Octavian Meredith married my daughter, I settled upon her the sum of sixty thousand pounds; and I further agreed to allow Meredith a thousand a year for his own pocket-money. Well, my lord, before Zoe went abroad, she executed a power of attorney, enabling me to manage her finances for her—so that Lord Octavian should be supplied with a sufficiency to maintain the establishment in the Regent's Park, and I was to remit such sums as Zoe might require for her own expenses."

"And you do not mean me to understand," said the Duke, in a deep tone of anxiety, "that you have made away with your daughter's money?"

A moan from the lips of the wretched Armytage conveyed the response. Marchmont was indeed profoundly shocked: for he was at once smitten

with the dread that exactions far greater than those previously made—great though these already were—would be sooner or later attempted in respect to his own purse.

"Yes—it is but too true!" continued Armytage, in a scarcely audible voice. "The rascality of that man Preston was an ominous date for me! Down to that period everything had gone well: whatsoever I touched seemed to turn into gold: but since then everything has gone wrong—the money, as you just now expressed it, has melted away ten thousand times faster than ever it was previously made or got. Or perhaps I myself have speculated more recklessly—more desperately! And yet how could it be otherwise? I sought to repair the terrible losses I sustained——"

"And your daughter's money is all gone—absolutely gone?" inquired Marchmont, still incredulous in respect to so colossal an evil.

"Yes—gone, gone!" responded Armytage: and again he groaned in bitterness. "Now your Grace can understand why I am so desponding at times, and wherefore I am haunted with such fearful apprehensions. If ruin overtakes me, it will not be ruin for myself alone—but ruin for Zoe—ruin for her husband——ruin therefore for all three!"

"And do you really anticipate that this last speculation of your's may turn out wrong?"

"Again I say, heaven forbid! But your Grace knows the terrible uncertainties of such ventures. Look you, my lord!" exclaimed Armytage, with a sudden access of fervid, almost wild joy. "If I succeed, this day month will behold me in possession of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds! With that sum I restore Zoe's fortune—I pay Coleman—I return your Grace the loan you so kindly advanced —— Oh, yes! fortune *must* favour me——it is impossible it can be otherwise!"

"And if it should happen to turn out contrary to your expectations," said the Duke,—"have you a very hard man to deal with in this Mr. Coleman?"

"To tell your Grace the truth, I can scarcely understand him," replied Armytage. "It was not I who originally sought him out: he came to seek me. It was very shortly after that first little embarrassment of mine, which arose from Preston's failure, you know—and when your Grace so generously advanced me fifty thousand pounds in January last—Mr. Coleman one day called upon me. Apologizing for having introduced himself, he said that he had a wealthy client who wished to lay out his money at good interest; and as he knew that I had excellent opportunities of accommodating the members of the aristocracy and fashionable gentlemen with loans, he had taken the liberty of waiting upon me for the purpose of ascertaining if I would thus use any money he might place in my hands. It was thus our connection commenced."

"And who is this wealthy client of Mr. Coleman's?" asked the Duke, thinking it probable that he might be the same who was secretly urging the lawyer on to the prosecution of Madame Angelique.

"I do not know," replied Armytage: "I never saw him—never even heard his name mentioned. In fact, my lord, I do not believe that there is any such client in the back-ground at all. There are several of these lawyers who lay out their own money at interest, pretending it is that of their clients. They do it to save their respectability and avoid the reputation of usurers. But as I was just now observing to your Grace, I cannot exactly make out this Mr. Coleman. He seemed to force his money upon me as it were in the first instance; and afterwards, when he found me punctual in my engagements with him, he suddenly appeared to place such unlimited confidence in me——and though I do verily believe he must have had a suspicion, from one or two little circumstances, that I was not so rich as I appeared to be, yet he unhesitatingly kept his word, and let me have that last sum of fifty thousand——"

"Rest assured, Armytage," interrupted the Duke of Marchmont, "he suspected nothing of what you fancy—or he would not have been quite so willing to give you his money. By the bye, did you ever hear him speak of being engaged in a prosecution against a certain house of fashionable resort—you understand what I mean—a house of a certain description——"

"No, never," responded Armytage. "When I have been at his office, we have conversed on nothing except the business which took me thither. And now, my lord, as I have reached the house where I have a call to make to-night——"

"Is it not rather late for a call, Armytage?" inquired the Duke with a smile.

"It is a young gentleman, named Softly, belonging to the Guards, and who will be of age in eight or ten months," replied the financier. "He wants to raise some money—he has sent for me—and I must therefore keep the time which best pleases himself. And now I bid your Grace good-night."

They separated accordingly; and as the Duke of Marchmont slowly took his way homeward, he revolved in his mind a certain plan which he had formed, and in furtherance of which he intended to enlist the aid of the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

MADAME ANGELIQUE'S THREE BILLETS.

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast on the following morning, Madame Angelique sate down at her writing-desk, and penned three notes, which she despatched to as many different addresses.

At about one in the afternoon an old nobleman, having passed through M. Bertin's house and entered that of the milliner by the mirror-contrived door, found his way to the elegantly appointed boudoir, where Madame Angelique was waiting to receive him. He was verging towards his eightieth year: his form was completely bowed: the few straggling hairs of his head were of snowy whiteness—his eyes were bleared—his face was one mass of puckerings and wrinkles—he had lost all his teeth—and the outline of his profile consisted of a number of sharp angles. He was so infirm that he walked with considerable difficulty: he had a continuous hacking cough; and he mumbled and stammered to a degree that rendered him scarcely intelligible. With the

whole of one foot and half the other in the grave —deaf, and in his dotage—this nobleman had nevertheless only just returned from an embassy at one of the principal Continental courts after an absence from England of some five or six years.

Lord Wenham—for such was his denomination —had been an old patron of Madame Angelique previous to his appointment to the embassy above alluded to: he was therefore well initiated in the mysteries of her household—but the four young ladies whom the private part of her establishment now contained, were complete strangers to him. She had heard of his recent return to the British metropolis; and being resolved to make a last penny out of him before she gave up business altogether, she had written him the note which now brought him into her presence.

"Why, my dear Madame Angelique," mumbled the old lord, as he deposited himself in an easy chair—an effort which raised so violent a fit of coughing that for upwards of a minute it seemed as if his enervated frame must be shattered to pieces,—"I vow and protest that you look—ugh! ugh!—this cough of mine!—younger than when I last saw you."

"And yet, my lord," responded the milliner, "the lapse of five years can scarcely make one look younger——"

"Ah, very good! very good!" said Lord Wenham, laughing with a chuckle that was hideous as a death-rattle. "Yes, yes—in spite of five years you find me looking—ugh! ugh!—younger also?" —for be it observed that on account of his deafness he had not caught the precise terms of the milliner's speech.

"You look so young, my lord," exclaimed Madame Angelique, taking advantage of the little error into which he had fallen, and now speaking loud enough to make herself heard, "that I am convinced you are as terrible amongst the fair sex as ever!"

"Ah, ah! I understand," said Lord Wenham: "you have got—ugh! ugh!—some sweet creature that you mean to tempt me with—eh? eh?—ugh! ugh!"

"Fully esteeming your lordship's kind patronage," rejoined Madame Angelique, "before you went as Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the Court of——, I was resolved to give you the preference for the most beautiful girl that ever confidingly placed herself in my hands. I can assure you, my lord," added the wily woman, with a significant look, "that she is as pure and virtuous as the day she was born—an immaculate virgin!"

The old nobleman leered and licked his lips salaciously.

"It is a positive fact, my lord," continued Madame Angelique. "The truth is, she has recently been left an orphan: and to be candid, she is a niece of mine. What can I do with her, poor thing! except provide for her in a way of which her beauty renders her so deserving?"

"To be sure! to be sure!" said the old nobleman, who in order that he might not lose a single syllable that fell from Madame Angelique's lips, drew forth an ear-trumpet, and listened therewith. "Go on——ugh! ugh!"

"It is all precisely as I have the honour to inform your lordship," continued the woman: "and therefore——But what do you think?" she suddenly ejaculated. "Somehow or another the Duke of Marchmont heard of this lovely creature being under my care; and he came last night and offered me five hundred guineas to take her off my hands. But I said, 'No, no, my Lord Duke! I have the honour of a nobleman's acquaintance who I know will cheerfully write me a cheque for a thousand, and bear off Miss Eglantine in triumph!'—That's what I said, my lord."

"And you meant me?" said Lord Wenham, full of nervous anxiety to obtain possession of the much-vaunted prize: "you meant me, my dear creature——ugh! ugh! this cough of mine!—— But you meant me?"

"Certainly I did, my lord! And was I not right?"

"To be sure! to be sure!" responded his lordship. "But can you really guarantee—eh!—— you know what I mean——ugh! ugh!"

"That she is innocence itself!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "In short, she is almost *too* prudish: but I have no doubt that with your lordship's powers of cajolery—those powers which, as the newspapers say, you used to such effect when you put the Foreign Minister at the Court of —— in such a dilemma——"

"Ah, you have heard of that?" said the ancient diplomatist, chuckling. "Egad! I talked his Excellency off to sleep; and when he woke up, he signed the treaty in the twinkling of an eye. But about this Miss Eglantine——what a sweet name! dear me, what a sweet name!——ugh! ugh! ugh!"

"She is your's therefore, my lord!" answered Madame Angelique; "and the bargain is concluded."

"Eh?—stop!" cried his lordship. "I should just like, you know, to see her first of all—merely, you know——ugh! ugh!—this cough of mine ——ugh!"

"To be sure! I will go and fetch her at once. There are writing-materials: your lordship can pen the cheque—for if you are not satisfied with the first view of her, your lordship can but cancel the draught."

Having thus spoken, Madame Angelique issued from the boudoir; and leaving his lordship in the midst of an ecstatic fit of coughing, she ascended to the private chamber of Miss Eglantine, who had only just completed her toilet. For this paragon of virtue and innocence, who was also tinged with prudery, had been passing the night, and several hours of the forenoon also, in the arms of one of the frequenters of Madame Angelique's establishment.

"Now, my dear girl," said the crafty woman, "I am come to announce to you that your fortune is made. I purpose to give up my business as soon as possible: but in all motherly kindness I mean to provide for the dear girls—yourself included—whom I look upon as my daughters. Here is a nobleman immensely rich, who will take you into his keeping: he will allow you at least eighty pounds a week; and if you play your cards well, you can marry him. To be sure, he is not quite so young as he might be—perhaps sixty or so, though he may look a trifle older: but then there is *this* to be considered—that you can manage him all the more easily; for he is somewhat in his dotage. Come along with me at once.

You must look as modest as possible; and when, in his lordship's presence, I hint at the connexion you are about to form with him, you had better shriek out—not too loud, you know, for fear of being overheard——and then you can cling to me; and if you choose to go off in a fit, why, it may perhaps be as well. However, in the long run you will yield your consent; and his lordship will provide for you this very day. Of course you understand, my dear, that I am perfectly disinterested in what I am doing for you: my only object is to give you a comfortable position—and I do not get one farthing by it——no, not a fraction!"

Eglantine was perfectly willing to fall into the infamous woman's views; and she at once followed Madame Angelique to the boudoir. A glance at the writing-desk showed the milliner that the cheque lay there, ready drawn out; and the instant she had introduced Eglantine to the ex-ambassador, she seized the opportunity while his lordship's eyes were riveted gloatingly upon the supposed victim of an aunt's treacherous cupidity, to catch up the draft and thrust it amidst the folds of her dress. The entire scene, as previously arranged, was then gone through: the half-subdued shriek was uttered—the prudery was affected—the appeal to the wicked aunt was made by the innocent and virtuous niece—and then the latter sank gracefully down in a fit, just as an actress swoons or dies upon the stage—though with perhaps a trifle more of voluptuous abandonment of the form. Water was sprinkled upon Eglantine's countenance: she suffered herself to be slowly recovered—she then listened with admirable patience and meekness to Madame Angelique's reasoning—and with an equal degree of exemplary resignation she yielded herself to her destiny.

In the afternoon Lord Wenham came in his carriage to fetch away his paragon of virtue; and he placed her in a sumptuously furnished house which he hired for her accommodation, with an allowance of eighty pounds per week. We may add that in the evening of the very same day on which his lordship paid Madame Angelique a thousand guineas for the beautiful Eglantine and gave the young lady the first instalment of her magnificent income, he most generously and nobly forwarded a cheque for two guineas to the Secretary of the Society for the Distribution of Bread amongst the Famishing Poor, and a cheque for twenty guineas to the Association for the Protection of Young Females.

To return however, to Madame Angelique. Scarcely had she effected her most disinterested arrangement with Lord Wenham, and had dismissed the paralyzed doting old nobleman,—when the second of the three billets which she had despatched in the morning, was personally answered by the appearance of a gentleman rejoicing in the name of Mr. White Choker. He was dressed in complete black, and wore a low cravat of snowy fairness. He showed no shirt-collar, and had altogether a very clerical look. His hair was cropped all round like a Puritan's, and was combed sleek and straight down over his forehead. He had a long pale countenance, the expression of which was so habitually that of sanctimonious self-martyrization and lugubrious demureness, that even when he tried to smile on entering the milliner's boudoir, he looked like an undertaker or a funeral-mute making a desperate attempt to appear gay. Very keen-sighted persons, on regarding Mr. White Choker more closely, might have fancied that there was something in the expression of his coarse lips and in the gleaming of his dark deep-set small eyes which denoted the strong passions of the man and the difficulty he had in concealing them beneath the gloss of assumed sanctity and hypocritical cant: but on this point we ourselves say nothing—for Mr. White Choker was a saint!

Yes—great indeed was he at Exeter Hall at the period of the May meetings. Who could so well declaim against the ignorance and demoralization of the lower classes? who could whine and moan and weep in such desperate anguish at the benighted condition of the heathen, thousands and thousands of miles off in the islands of the South Pacific? Who could so pathetically enforce the necessity of sending missionaries, and flannel jackets, and hymn-books, and tracts, and all kinds of godly publications, to the poor naked cannibals of those same islands? Who was more ready in putting down his money for the Foreign Bible Society, or in taking up the starving beggar who implored alms of him in a street of the British metropolis? In a word, Mr. White Choker was a veritable saint: his name was considered synonymous with piety and philanthropy themselves; and if it were the fashion in this Protestant country for persons to be canonized—and before they were dead too—Mr. White Choker was the very man whom all the Exeter Hallites would have selected for the honour, and whom the whole Bench of Bishops would have pronounced worthy thereof.

Of course the reader is fully prepared to hear that so good a man could only have come to Madame Angelique's establishment with one object: namely, to read its proprietress a very long and serious lecture on the wickedness of the life she was leading. And yet somehow or another this was *not* the worthy gentleman's aim: for, as we have seen, it was in answer to one of the milliner's billets that he now showed himself in her presence.

"My dear Mr. Choker," she began, with one of her most amiable smiles, "I am sure you will be delighted to learn that I have resolved upon retiring from business and living henceforth respectably upon my means."

"Come now, mother," said the white-cravatted gentleman, with a more successful attempt at a laugh than he had previously made, "this is not Exeter Hall—neither is it a committee of the Foreign Cannibal-Reclaiming, Negro-Christianising and Naked-Savage-Clothing Society. Everything is good in its place and way——"

"And you have come, my dear Mr. Choker," interrupted Madame Angelique, blandly, "for whatsoever I may have good in *my* place and in *my* way to put at your disposal?"

"That is speaking like a true Chris——I mean like a woman of the world," said Mr. Choker, thus very properly correcting himself.

"It is a long, long time, my dear sir," continued the milliner, "since the light of your countenance shone within my humble habitation; and

therefore I thought that I might take the liberty, under peculiar circumstances, of inviting you here on the present occasion."

"The truth is," answered Mr. White Choker, "that hypocritical scoundrel Obadiah Snufflenose, the Vice-President of our Society, frequents your house; and as he and I are at daggers-drawn——"

"And yet," exclaimed Madame Angelique, with some degree of astonishment, "I saw the other day a published letter of your's to the gentleman you name, and commencing, 'Dearest and best beloved brother in the good work, Obadiah Snufflenose——'"

"I tell you once more," said Mr. White Choker, with considerable asperity, "that we are not sitting in committee upon the distribution of that last new tract addressed to all savoury vessels. But d—n the vessels! My dear madam, let's get to business. Why did you send for me?"

"If you were to hear, Mr. White Choker," continued Madame Angelique, "that I have the loveliest German girl beneath this roof, who has only gone astray once—*once*, upon my honour, and no more——"

"Ah, if I thought I could rely upon you," said Mr. Choker, whose curiosity, as well as a stronger passion, was considerably piqued. "But it was not altogether on account of Snufflenose that I have staid away from your establishment for the last three or four years: it was because that young creature—you remember her well—that you furnished me, with the solemn assurance she was chastity herself, presented me with—a—a—thumping boy four of five months afterwards, and threatened to expose me if I did not provide for the brat. Ah, madam, that was a sad, sad affair——"

"But, my dear friend Mr. Choker," interrupted Madame Angelique, "we are all liable to error——"

"But such an error as that, my dear madam! Only conceive a thumping boy!"—and the white-cravatted gentleman's countenance became so elongated at the bare thought, that at the moment it could have vied with the length of her bright poker itself.

"Well, my dear sir, I admit the thumping boy was a great nuisance—a very great nuisance. But in this case, with my beautiful charming Linda, who has only fallen once, there cannot possibly be any such apprehension. If you were just to see her——But what do you think?" ejaculated the milliner, thus suddenly interrupting herself. "Old Lord Wenham was here just now, and he actually and positively drew me out a cheque for four hundred guineas for this sweet German. And what did I say? 'No, no, my lord; I have the honour of being acquainted with a gentleman who will give five hundred!' That's what I said, Mr. Choker!"

"But you mentioned no name?" said the saint, anxiously.

"Not for the world!" responded Madame Angelique. "And this dear Linda, who is discretion itself,—she will never betray you: but she will go to Exeter Hall when you are to speak—and she will wave the white handkerchief—she will weep too at your most pathetic passages——in fact, she will set an entire bench-full of the audience whimpering and sobbing."

"Oh, bother take Exeter Hall at this present moment!" cried the saint; and his interjection was accompanied by a most unsaint-like oath. "You want five hundred guineas for this Linda? Hum! ha! But is she so very beautiful? is she well formed—stout—luxurious——"

"A superb bust, my dear Mr. Choker. But come! here are writing-materials—draw up the cheque—and I will go and fetch the charming Linda, so that you may arrive at a speedy decision."

With these words, Madame Angelique quitted the boudoir; and ascended to the chamber of the German girl,—who having, like Miss Eglantine, recently dismissed an admirer who regularly visited her twice a week, was finishing her toilet by the aid of a female dependant. The maid was dismissed from the room; and Madame Angelique, having intimated her intention of retiring into private life, proceed to address the young lady in the following manner:—.

"It is therefore my duty as well as my pleasure, dear Linda, to provide for yourself and companions. You know what I have just done for Eglantine; and now it is your turn. A very pious gentleman will take you into his keeping: he will pension you handsomely; and when your child is born—which I suppose will be in about five months—he *must* provide for it liberally, because you will have him completely in your power. He has got a wife and large family; and if you only threaten to go to his house and create a disturbance, you might bring him to any terms. He is immensely rich, and as thorough-paced a hypocrite as ever the sun shone upon. Of course, my dear girl, you will keep your condition a secret as long as you can; and between you and me, I have assured him that you are but one remove from complete chastity——However, you will know how to manage your white-cravatted puritan; and now come and be introduced to him. Stop!—you can throw a kerchief over your neck, so as to appear modest; and you can easily suffer it to glide off, as if quite unconsciously, in the bashful confusion of your thoughts."

Linda was well pleased with the arrangements thus sketched forth; and the kerchief being duly thrown over her neck, she accompanied Madame Angelique to the boudoir, where Mr. White Choker had in the meantime penned the cheque for five hundred guineas. Linda appeared all blushing modesty; and her looks were bent down, as the saint devoured her with his gloating eyes. There was a little conversation, during which the kerchief glided off from the syren's white neck and voluptuous bosom; and her triumph was complete.

In the evening Mr. White Choker came in a street-cab to fetch away his charmer; and though he dared not use his own private carriage for the purpose, he nevertheless promised that on the following day Linda should have the most beautiful turn-out of her own that was to be seen in all London. He installed her in a beautiful little suburban villa, ready furnished, and which he had hired off-hand for her immediate accommodation: then, as an excuse for passing that first night away from home, he assured the wife of his bosom, the excellent Mrs. White Choker, that he was going to keep a vigil of blessed prayer by the bedside of

a dear brother in the good work, who was lying at that extremity which was but the passport to the realm of eternal bliss.

Scarcely had Madame Angelique completed her transaction with Mr. White Choker, when the Hon. Augustus Softly was announced. This young gentleman had just entered his twenty-first year, and would inherit on attaining his majority a fortune of sixty thousand pounds, if he had not already anticipated it by bills and bonds to the tune of nearly one-half. He had recently obtained a commission in the Guards; and on being emancipated from the apron strings of his fashionable mamma, he had resolved to see a little of "life." It was however chiefly at night-time that he took his survey of what he termed "life:" for inasmuch as he was never in bed until three or four o'clock in the morning, he slept till it was time to turn out for parade—after which he drank so copiously of bottled stout and cherry-brandy at lunch, "just to give a tone to his stomach," that he was usually constrained to go to bed again in order to sleep off the effects of so much liquor and rise refreshed for dinner-time. Then his stomach required a new "tone;" and if a couple of bottles of champagne, with other vinous fluids, were capable of affording such tone, the Hon. Augustus Softly certainly adopted the panacea for procuring it. Turning out "to see life" at ten o'clock at night, he had the advantage of the gas-lamps to show him how to break policemen's heads; or else he dropped into some fashionable gambling house, where there was light sufficient for the black-legs and sharpers there to pillage him most unmercifully, though apparently not light enough to show the young gentleman himself that he was thus fleeced.

In personal appearance the Hon. Augustus Softly was short and thin — totally beardless, though he adopted every known method of inducing a moustache to make its appearance against its own inclination; and his air was altogether so boyish that he did not look above seventeen. He had tolerably regular features, of an aristocratic cast; but the expression of his countenance was insipid and vacant, even to stolidity. Frivolous-minded and shallow-pated, with all the follies of a boy, he rather aped than was endowed with the manners of a man. His idea of "life" seemed to consist in hurrying himself on to rack and ruin as fast as ever he could—raising money at exorbitant interest—plunging into debt—lavishing his gold upon pretended friends, who flattered him to his face and laughed at him behind his back—playing the spendthrift amongst the dissolute and the depraved—thinking it one of the finest things to drop a few hundreds at the gaming-table, and the finest thing of all to let my Lord Swindlehurst palm off on him for five hundred guineas a horse that would be dear at fifty. Such was Lieutenant Softly's idea of "life;" and this was the young gentleman who, having received Madame Angelique's third billet, now came to answer it in person.

We must observe that the Hon. Augustus Softly had only visited the milliner's establishment on two former occasions; and each of those times Mademoiselle Armantine, the French girl, was absent for some reason or another. This Madame Angelique knew full well: she was consequently aware that the young gentleman had never as yet seen her—and hence the game which she was about to play.

"Well, old lady," he said, on entering the boudoir—for he thought it mighty fine to adopt a familiar manner with Madame Angelique; and we should incidentally remark that he spoke with the languid dissipated air and with the drawing-room drawl which are best approved amongst silly young men in fashionable life—"well, old lady, what on earth could have made you send to drag me out of my comfortable bed at such an unseemly hour in the morning?"

"Yes, it is unseemly," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "I admit it. Only four in the afternoon—in the morning, I mean! But then you see, you fashionable young gentlemen turn night into day, and day into night——Oh! it is positively shocking, you naughty fellows!"

"Why, there's really nothing going on in the day-time," said Mr. Softly, with an air of satiety and disgust. "I am sick of bowing to the same beauties in the Park—sick of lounging up Regent Street; and as for morning-calls—why, we of the Guards, you know, never pay them!"

"Ah! I repeat, you gentlemen of the Guards are such terrible fellows!" said Madame Angelique, with a deprecating look: "you are enough to turn the heads of all the sweet creatures—ravish their hearts——"

"Well, I flatter myself," drawled out Mr. Softly, leaning affectedly back in his chair and caressing his beardless chin with an air of languid listlessness, "we of the Guards are rather overpowering in our way."

"You may well say that, my dear Mr. Softly: for if you only knew why I took the liberty of asking you to favour me with a call this afternoon——morning, I mean——"

"Some precious wickedness, I'll be bound!"—and Mr. Softly condescended to give forth a slight laugh, which corresponded amazingly well with his drawing-room drawl.

"Wickedness indeed, you naughty good-for-nothing fellow!" responded the wily woman, shaking her finger at her intended victim. "Here is the sweetest, loveliest, young French girl, who has only been in keeping with the Duke of Marchmont for two months, at the rate of a hundred guineas a week—and who has left him—positively and actually left his Grace, all through you!"

"Through me, old lady?" said Augustus, running his fingers through his limp light hair, which hung in what are called rat's tails over his ears. "What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean that she went to see the Guards parade the other day; and she came running off to me—for I am her milliner, you must know—to ask if I could tell her who was that duck of a young officer? And then she described you!"

"How delicious!—positively delicious!" said Mr. Softly, chuckling and rubbing his hands.

"I knew whom she meant in a moment," continued Madame Angelique; "because when she said that she alluded to the handsomest, the genteelest, and yet the most military-looking of all the young officers, I was perfectly well aware whom she was speaking of: and when I told her that I had the honour of your acquaintance, she nearly

fainted with joy—and she vowed that she could be happier with you on fifty guineas a week, than with his Grace of Marchmont on two hundred."

"Why this is as good as a romance!" exclaimed the delighted and credulous Augustus.

"Quite as good," answered Madame Angelique: and she no doubt thought precisely what she said. "Only conceive, my dear Softly, the honour, the fame, and the glory of running off with a Duke's mistress! Why, it is better than running off with his wife: because a man of the world is always more sensitive in respect to his mistress than he is to his wife. How you will be spoken about!—what a noise you will make!—what a sensation!——and all the ladies will smilingly call you the naughty man!"

"'Pon my soul, it will be quite delicious!" exclaimed Lieutenant Softly. "But is she beautiful?"

"Beautiful, elegant, and accomplished," rejoined Madame Angelique. "She is the daughter of an old French Marquis; and Marchmont took her, by my aid, from a convent between two and three months ago. She never really liked the Duke: her only object was to escape from a seclusion which she abhorred; and as for her virtue, apart from this one little failing, I am ready to guarantee it in a bond of a hundred thousand pounds, or on an affadavit sworn before the Lord Mayor of London."

Of course such guarantees clinched the argument—at least in the mind of the credulous, conceited, and frivolous Augustus Softly; and already as elate as he could be with his presumed conquest, he gave vent to his delight in the most extravagant expressions—all of which Madame Angelique carefully echoed, while laughing in her sleeve.

"Feeling confident," she resumed, "that you would grant the dear girl an interview, I sent to request that she would pay me a visit this afternoon. But would you believe it? she is so frenzied with delight, that she orders her maid to pack up, bag and baggage—and away she comes, leaving the splendid apartments the Duke had provided for her—and upon her toilette-table a rose-tinted perfumed billet, with a few laconic lines to the effect that she separates from his Grace for ever! I told her that her conduct was madness, as she could not possibly be sure that you would take her under your own protection——though it is true that old Lord Wenham, who was here just now, and saw her alight at my door, offered me two hundred and fifty guineas if I would use my influence——"

"By Jove, I will just make it double!" ejaculated Softly. "I hope you will not feel offended——"

"I really do not know," said Madame Angelique, with a very serious countenance, "whether I ought to receive anything in a transaction which is really so delicate, and which I merely undertook to manage from motives of pity for the sweet creature and out of regard for you. But if you *must* write a cheque for five hundred guineas, I cannot think of wounding your feelings by refusing to accept it."

"How lucky I got that loan through Armytage this morning!" thought the young lieutenant to himself, as, putting aside all his fashionable languor, he flew to the desk to pen the cheque: "or else I should have cut but a devilish sorry figure with the old lady—and should have lost the French beauty."

"Dear me, what creatures you young Guardsmen are!" said Madame Angelique, as if musing to herself, but taking very good care that the Hon. Augustus Softly should catch the words which she uttered. "I never saw such killing men—their very looks are sufficient to conquer female hearts in a moment!"

"Where is the beauty?" asked Softly, drinking in all this pleasant flattery.

"I will go and fetch her," said Madame Angelique: and she issued from the boudoir.

Mademoiselle Armantine had passed the preceding night in the arms of an *attaché* to a Foreign Embassy:—not a German one, for Madame Angelique knowing very well that the German representatives of their native princes, were a set of scurvy paupers, never allowed them to set foot in her establishment. The French girl was in an elegant evening toilet; and she looked ravishingly beautiful. Madame Angelique complimented her upon her bewitching appearance; and then addressed her in the ensuing manner:—

"You are already aware, my dear Armantine, that I am about to give up my business, and that I have already provided in the handsomest manner for those dear girls Eglantine and Linda. Your turn is now come; and between you and me, my dear, you are the best off. What think you of a young, handsome, and elegant officer of the Guards—exceedingly intelligent and accomplished—witty and clever—not yet of age, but able to raise as much money as he thinks fit?"

Armantine's countenance expressed her satisfaction with the proposed arrangement.

"I am glad that you are pleased," continued Madame Angelique; "and it is all the more delightful to me, inasmuch as the trouble I am taking is purely disinterested. But there are one or two little things that I must tell you, my dear young friend."

She then explained the particulars of the tale which she had told the Hon. Augustus Softly,—adding, "You can safely give him the same assurances: for I will take care that Marchmont shall not contradict you. I can do anything I like with the Duke; and as for that part of the history which flattered the young officer with the idea of the violent passion you have conceived for him——"

"Trust to me to play my part properly," interjected Armantine. "Of all men as a protector, I could best fancy an officer in the Guards!"

"He will allow you fifty guineas a week," rejoined Madame Angelique; "and if within a twelvemonth you do not ruin him completely, it will be your own fault. My dear girl, the reputation of a young lady is never established until she has ruined three or four of her lovers. Look at your celebrated actresses——But no matter! Softly must be dying of impatience; and you must accompany me forthwith. Remember, my dear, bashful tenderness and modest joy—that is your cue!"

The infamous woman thereupon conducted the pliant and willing French girl to the boudoir, and so well did Armantine play her part that the Hon. Augustus Softly was completely ravished by his

presumed conquest. Madame Angelique took possession of the cheque unperceived by Armantine,—who that same evening left the establishment, to take up her new abode in the splendidly furnished lodgings which her lover had lost no time in engaging for her reception.

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

AMY.

The village of Headcorn is at no great distance from the town of Ashford in the county of Kent. About a quarter of a mile from Headcorn stood a neat little cottage in the midst of a garden; and the place was the property of an elderly woman—the widow of a small farmer who had held land in that neighbourhood. It was in this cottage that Amy Sutton, formerly lady's-maid to the Duchess of Marchmont, was now lodging.

Some weeks had elapsed since her meeting with Christian Ashton in the train on her journey to Headcorn; and the reason which had induced the unfortunate young woman to seek this retirement, could no longer be concealed from the eyes of the world. She was in a way to become a mother.

It was in the afternoon; and Amy was seated alone in the little parlour which she occupied at the cottage. There was a work-basket on the table—but she did not work: there were books on a shelf—but she had recourse to none of them to beguile the time. She was plunged in deep thought; and the expression of her countenance would have shown to an observer, if any at the time were near, that the tenour of her reflections was of a dark ominously brooding character. She had informed Christian of the exact truth in respect to the black treachery which Marchmont

had perpetrated towards her; and she was resolved on vengeance. Amy was naturally one of those dispositions that, coldly implacable when once a determination of this sort was settled, exhibited no feverish impatience to carry it out until opportunity served. She would bide her time—and therefore her's was a character all the more dangerous, and the revenge she contemplated was all the more certain to be sooner or later wreaked.

But it was not the sense of her wrongs which solely engaged her thoughts: she had to deplore the fall of a sister more beauteous than even she herself was, and whom she had loved as tenderly as her cold disposition would permit her to love at all. She had in the morning of that day received a letter from her sister; and the contents thereof entertwined themselves with the reflections that she was pursuing in regard to her own position.

The farmer's widow was no relation to Amy Sutton: but they had become acquainted by some means which it is not worth while pausing to describe; and when Amy had found that the time was approaching when she could no longer be able to conceal her position from the world, she bethought herself of Mrs. Willis as a woman in whom she could confide, and of her rural habitation as a place where she might bring forth in seclusion the offspring of her shame and dishonour. For in such a light does society regard the illegitimately born; although the mother may have been guiltless of wanton frailty, and merely the victim of foulest treachery—as was the case with poor Amy Sutton.

It was in the afternoon, as we have said, that she was sitting in the little parlour at the cottage when her ear caught the sound of footsteps approaching through the garden; and raising her eyes, she beheld Christian Ashton. Her first impulse was to order the servant-girl to deny her to the young gentleman: for be it recollected that when they were travelling together, she had not revealed to him the full extent of the misery entailed upon her by the Duke of Marchmont's black criminality. But a second thought determined her to see him. He was already acquainted with nearly every thing that regarded her;—and of what avail to keep back the rest? Besides, in her solitude she could welcome him as an old acquaintance—almost as a friend: she knew him to be a youth of the strictest probity and honour; and there is no sorrow so desperate but that it may derive a balm, however slight and however evanescent in its effect, from friendly companionship.

Christian was accordingly introduced; and with that air of frank kindness which was natural to him, he proffered his hand,—saying, "I would not pass by this neighbourhood, Amy, without seeing you—although my time is not completely my own."

The unfortunate young woman had instinctively risen on the entrance of one whom she regarded as a superior; and then her condition was at once revealed to his view. His sense of delicacy as well as his generosity however prevented him from betraying that he noticed the circumstance; and in the same considerate mood he at once glided into discourse upon the current topics of the day. He was almost sorry that he had intruded upon the young woman's privacy, painfully situated as she was: but he had presented himself there with a kind motive—for the tale she had told him in the railway carriage had enlisted his sympathy on her behalf.

"You can no longer be ignorant, Mr. Ashton," Amy at length said, while her countenance was suffused with the glow of mingled shame and indignation, "of the reason which led me into this seclusion. I am unhappy—so unhappy, Mr. Ashton, that were it not for the sake of revenge I should not cling to life. But, Oh, revenge will be so sweet!—and deadly indeed shall its nature be when the proper time for wreaking it arrives!"

"Great though your wrongs have been, Amy," said Christian, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "think you that you do well thus to keep your mind in a state of incessant excitement by brooding over this hoped-for vengeance?"

"It has become to me the sustaining food of existence," answered the unfortunate young woman; "and if I perish on the scaffold I will have the life of that man! Unless indeed it be possible to wreak some vengeance which he may live to feel——"

"For heaven's sake, Amy, speak not in this dreadful manner!" exclaimed Christian. "To talk of taking the life of the Duke of Marchmont, displays a frightful recklessness in respect to your own life."

"And what have I to live for?" demanded the young woman, with even a fierce sternness. "Not for the child that will be the offspring of mingled outrage and shame! No," she added bitterly: "I loathe and abhor it even before it is born!"

"You will think differently," said our young hero, "when the babe nestles in your bosom."

"As soon place a viper there!" ejaculated Amy Sutton. "But I was about to tell you that I *have* nothing, and *can* have nothing—save my present hope of vengeance—which binds me to life. When that is accomplished, I shall be ready to die—or in the accomplishment of it I may engulf myself!"

"But have you no relatives," asked Christian, infinitely pained as well as shocked by the language that flowed from the lips of the unfortunate young woman,—"have you no relatives who could be kind to you now, and who would have to deplore your fate if by your own madness——"

"I have one relative whom I loved—yes, still love," responded Amy, in a mournful tone,—"a very near one—a sister: but she is likewise fallen!"

"By treachery also?" asked Christian.

"No—by her own wantonness and weakness," rejoined Amy. "I will tell you a brief narrative. We two sisters were left orphans at a somewhat early age: an aunt took charge of Marion—another aunt took charge of me. The aunt who adopted Marion was the richer of the two relatives; and she gave Marion an education fitting her for the position of a lady. The aunt who took charge of me, brought me up to a genteel servitude—namely, the position of a lady's-maid. This aunt died when I was between fifteen and sixteen: I went into service—and have ever since earned my bread by mine own honest industry. My aunt taught me thrift—and I have been thrifty: or else I should not now possess the means of retiring awhile from the world—for not one single coin of the gold that the villain M[illegible]

mont offered as a recompense for his foul treachery, did I accept! But I was about to speak of Marion. It would be difficult to conceive a more lovely creature: she is indeed exquisitely beautiful—and her beauty has proved her ruin. Two years ago the aunt who had adopted her, died suddenly; and the property which she intended Marion to inherit, was swept away into the possession of strangers, through some informality in the will of the deceased. I recommended Marion to obtain a situation as a governess—for which her accomplishments fitted her. She went into a family in that capacity; but in a short time she became the victim of a seducer. This was the Earl of Beltinge; and with him she lived until very recently. I thought all the while—or at least until some weeks back—that she was still in her position as a governess: for her letters gave me an assurance to that effect. On leaving the service of the Duchess of Marchmont, I went to see my sister: but instead of finding her living as a preceptress in a respectable family, I found her luxuriating in the gilded infamy which at once proclaimed itself to my comprehension. Then, in the agony of my mind, I revealed everything which related to myself—told her how I had likewise fallen, though heaven knows through no fault of mine!—and told her likewise who was the author of my ruin. Then I came hither."

Amy ceased suddenly; and Christian, much pained by the narrative which he had just heard, said in a gentle voice, "I fear from the manner in which you broke off, that you have nothing to add in respect to penitence and reformation on the part of your erring sister?"

"Alas, nothing!" responded Amy Sutton. "So far from seeking to turn into a better path, Marion has taken a downward step in the career which she is pursuing. The Earl of Beltinge discovered that she was faithless to him; and in a moment he discarded her. Yes—mercilessly, though perhaps his severity was justifiable enough, he turned her adrift into the streets,—stripping her of every valuable and costly gem with which he had presented her during the time she was under his protection. What resource had she? The unfortunate girl found her way to a house of fashionable infamy, which is not altogether—at least in one sense—unknown to you."

"To me?" ejaculated Christian, in the most unfeigned astonishment: and then with a look of indignation, he said, "I can assure you, Miss Sutton——"

"I did not mean to offend nor to insult you," responded the young woman. "The fashionable house of infamy to which I allude, is that same Madame Angelique's——"

"Ah, I comprehend!" cried Christian,—"the place where those dresses were made, the diabolical use of which so nearly proved fatal to the character of the Duchess of Marchmont!"

"The same," Amy replied: "for the avocation of a dressmaker has been for years carried on by Madame Angelique, as a blind for the loathsome traffic which she pursues behind the scenes."

"And yet the Duchess herself patronized her at one time," observed our hero.

"Yes—but in total ignorance of the real character of that house," rejoined Amy; "and in the same manner Madame Angelique has had many lady customers who knew not the vile nature of the woman whom they thus patronized. But as I was telling you, Marion betook herself to that abode of fashionable infamy,—where she dwelt for a short time. There she occasionally met Marchmont; and he, little suspecting that she was my sister, made overtures, which of course she invariably rejected. She left that house the day before yesterday. I have received a letter from her this morning: she tells me that she is now under the protection of a man whose name was at once familiar to me, and will be familiar enough to you. I mean Wilson Stanhope."

"The villain!" ejaculated Christian. "I have more reasons than one for loathing and abhorring that unprincipled man! He grossly insulted my sister—he lent himself, as you are aware, to the iniquitous designs of the Duke of Marchmont—and he insulted one likewise," added our hero, thinking of his well-beloved Isabella, "who is as dear to me as that affectionate and cherished sister to whom I have just alluded."

"Yes: Marion," continued Amy, "is now under the protection of that man; and singular enough is it that through the Duke of Marchmont's agency this change in her circumstances has been brought about. I am as yet unacquainted with all the particulars: Marion had not time to describe them yesterday—she will write to me again to-day—and to-morrow I shall know all."

"But is it possible," exclaimed Christian, shocked at the impression which Amy's statement had just left upon his mind, "that your sister can accept boons at the hands of him who has done such foul wrong unto yourself?"

Amy Sutton did not immediately answer our hero's question: but she looked at him hard in the face with a peculiar expression—and then said, "The unfortunate Marion is not so deeply depraved, nor so lost to every good feeling, that she is indifferent enough to her sister's wrongs as to accept favours from the author of them. No, Mr. Ashton! She will succour me in the pursuance of my revenge, if opportunity may serve; and from something which she hints in her letter, there is a chance that her services may prove thus available. But, Oh! if Marion could but be reclaimed——it is this that dwells in my mind! And now, after all I have told you of the degradation of my sister, and with your knowledge of my own shame and dishonour, I ask what have I worth living for—unless it be for revenge—and wherefore should I continue to cling to life when once that revenge is accomplished?"

Christian endeavoured to reason with the young woman in a proper manner: but she was deaf to all his remonstrances—her mind was evidently settled upon the wreaking a deadly vengeance of some sort against the Duke of Marchmont; and our hero saw with pain and sorrow that no friendly argument could divert her from her course. He therefore at length rose to depart.

"I have not as yet explained," he said, "the precise motive of my visit; and from something which you yourself let drop, it may be unnecessary to make the offer which I had originally intended. Judging from all you told me in the railway-carriage some weeks back, I fancied that you purposed to retire into some seclusion here

and not knowing how you might be situated in a financial point of view——"

"A thousand thanks, Mr. Ashton," responded Amy,—"but I have sufficient for all my purposes. Though declining this generous offer, I am not the less sensible of your well-meant kindness—and I shall be for ever grateful."

Christian took his departure; and returning to the station, he proceeded by the next train to London. On his arrival in the British metropolis, he repaired straight to Mrs. Macaulay's house in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square; and Mrs. Macaulay in person opened the front door to receive him.

"Well, my dear Mr. Ashton, it is quite an age since I saw you!" exclaimed the lodging-house-keeper, with her blandest smiles and most amiable looks. "Where have you been for the last two months? But, dear me! how you are improving—and what a fine handsome young man you are growing! A lady of my age may pay you such a compliment, you know. But pray walk in. Your room is all ready for your reception. I have got rid of that odious old couple who used to lock up their tea-caddy and decant their wine for themselves. Would you believe it, Mr. Ashton?—they went away without so much as giving the maid a single shilling for herself; and they took off with them the leg and wing of a fowl which they had for the previous day's dinner!"

"My room is ready for me, you say?" exclaimed Christian in astonishment.

"Yes—to be sure!" responded Mrs. Macaulay. "Did not Mr. Redcliffe tell you in his letter——"

"He merely told me that immediately on my arrival in London I was to come to him, and that I need not take up my abode previously at any tavern or lodging-house."

"To be sure not!" ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay. "And where was your shrewdness, my dear Mr. Ashton, when you failed to comprehend that Mr. Redcliffe meant you to take up your abode here? All is settled and arranged; and it was on your account I got rid of those odious Johnsons, with their meanness and stinginess! Ah, you have brought all your luggage with you? That's right! But, dear me! don't think of paying the cabman till he has carried it up-stairs for you——And mind, my man," she added, addressing herself to the individual in question, "that you don't knock the paper off the walls with the corner of that great box. Now do walk in, Mr. Ashton."

"But where is Mr. Redcliffe?" inquired our hero.

"He will be in presently to dinner—at six o'clock as usual. It is only half-past five—and you have therefore plenty of time for a little chat with me. By the bye, I and that odious Mrs. Sifkin are as much at daggers-drawn as ever, although I gave that magnificent party in token of our reconciliation. But she behaved infamously! She went and told Mrs. Wanklin, who told Mrs. Chowley which keeps the baby-linen warehouse in the Tottenham Court Road, that I should say that Mr. Hogben had told me that both the Miss Chowleys were setting their caps at Captain Bluff. But here is Mr. Redcliffe, I declare!—a good twenty minutes before his time!"

Christian was not at all sorry that Mrs. Macaulay's garrulity should be cut short by the appearance of his friend,—at whose hands he received a most cordial welcome. Mrs. Macaulay was very anxious to have the paying of the cabman, with whom she would no doubt have got up a pleasant little dispute as to the amount of his fare: but Christian cut the matter short by slipping into the man's hand a gratuity so liberal that it made him touch his hat to the donor, and then bestow a look of insolent triumph on Mrs. Macaulay.

Christian accompanied Mr. Redcliffe to this gentleman's sitting-room,—where dinner was speedily served up. Mr. Redcliffe conversed on general topics during the repast; and as he was evidently postponing his explanation of the reasons which had induced him to send for Christian to London, our hero did not think it proper to put any question on the point. One or two little circumstances however struck him. From the very first moment of their acquaintance Mr. Redcliffe's manner had been invariably friendly: but now it was most kind and even affectionate. He moreover contemplated Christian frequently and fixedly; and after those earnest surveys he would sink into a profound reverie. All this our young hero could not possibly fail to notice; and he therefore awaited the coming explanations with all the more eager curiosity.

The repast was cleared away—the dessert and wine were placed upon the table—and Mr. Redcliffe then questioned Christian as to all that he had been recently doing. There was something in that gentleman's manner which invited the fullest confidence; and our hero accordingly revealed to Mr. Redcliffe his love for Isabella Vincent. He related everything which had occurred at Ramsgate; and having brought down the narrative to the point at which it is already known to the reader, he concluded in the following manner:—

"Yesterday morning's post brought Miss Vincent a letter, containing the startling announcement that her cousin the Earl of Lascelles, and her aunt the Countess, had ceased to exist: so that all in a moment Isabella found herself the heiress of fine estates and immense wealth. When she had recovered from the shock which the intelligence of that fatal accident or double suicide—whichever it was—naturally caused her to experience, the amiable and faithful girl gave me to understand that if the sudden possession of wealth were a source of satisfaction, it was because it would in due time enable her to prove the sincerity of that love which she entertains for me."

"My dear boy," exclaimed Mr. Redcliffe, with a degree of excitement which was very unusual on his part, "I am rejoiced to learn that you have found one who is so eminently deserving of your own devoted love, and who experiences so true a sentiment in return. But continue. What else have you to tell me?"

"The bridal of Sir Edgar Beverley and his beautiful Laura was celebrated yesterday," continued our hero; "and soon after the ceremony they set off for London, where they purpose to pass the honeymoon. Isabella accompanied them. She could not journey alone; and, as a matter of course, it was not discreet for me to travel with her. She has gone to that mansion which she originally entered a few months back in a state of dependence upon her uncle——she has gone to it as its mistress!"

"Such is the mutability of human affairs," observed Mr. Redcliffe solemnly. "But proceed, my dear Christian."

"It was originally arranged," continued our young hero, "that I should remain at Verner House until this morning; and therefore, even if this morning's post had not brought me your kind letter, I should have returned to the metropolis today. Rest assured, my dear sir, that I was most anxious to obey your summons with all possible despatch: but still I could not help halting for an hour by the way, to visit an unfortunate creature ——a victim of the Duke of Marchmont's!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Redcliffe; "when will this man's crimes cease to display themselves to me at every step? when will his career of iniquity be ended?"

"Never, I fear," responded Christian, "until his existence itself ceases."

Our hero then, at Mr. Redcliffe's request, narrated everything he had heard from the lips of the unfortunate young woman—not even omitting the painful episode in respect to her sister Marion. Mr. Redcliffe listened with the deepest attention; and when the youth's narrative was brought to a termination, Mr. Redcliffe addressed him in the following manner:—

"My dear Christian, from everything that you have told me, I deduce evidences of your right principles, the generosity of your disposition, and the intrinsic excellence of your character. At the very first I experienced such an interest in your behalf—indeed such an attachment towards yourself and your sister, that I should have at once proposed to place you in a condition of independence: but I felt how much better it was to leave you to eat the bread of industry for a time. I have kept my eye upon you; and I have also been aware that your sister was most comfortably situated under the friendly care of the Princess of Inderabad. The period has now arrived when you must no longer be left to shift for yourself in the world. I am a lone man, Christian—this you already know——you may think too that my habits are peculiar, my manners eccentric—and if for a single moment you doubt whether you can be happy beneath the same roof with myself, you shall be provided for elsewhere—until such time when——"

Mr. Redcliffe hesitated for a few instants; and the expression of some strong emotion passed over his countenance. He then added, "Until such time that your beautiful Isabella's period of mourning shall be ended and you may accompany her to the altar."

Again Mr. Redcliffe paused: he rose from his seat—paced twice to and fro in the apartment—and returning to his chair, said, "Think not, my dear Christian, that when the day of your marriage arrives, you will lead Miss Vincent to the altar as a dependant on her own fortune. No!—you shall have wealth, Christian—rest assured that you shall have wealth—and at least as an equal shall you lead her to that altar. Perhaps—perhaps——"

But Mr. Redcliffe stopped short; and our young hero, throwing himself at the feet of his benefactor, took his hand and pressed it to his lips. Mr. Redcliffe, who was profoundly affected, smoothed down the curling masses of Christian's raven hair,—at the same time murmuring, "My dear boy, there is nothing that I will not do for yourself and your sister!"

Christian hastened to assure his benefactor that so far from desiring to separate from him, or to live elsewhere, it would give him the utmost pleasure to dwell beneath the same roof.

"So be it, for the present," answered Mr. Redcliffe. "As for Christina, let her remain where she is: it is impossible that she can be in better companionship, or with a kinder friend. I have long known the Princess Indora——But enough, Christian! Let your sister continue to dwell with her Highness—until——"

And again Mr. Redcliffe stopped short, as if every instant he were afraid that in the excitement of his feelings he should be betrayed into the utterance of something more than he might choose to reveal. But our young hero was himself too full of varied emotions to perceive, much less to suspect the precise nature of those that were agitating his benefactor; and again was his heartfelt gratitude poured forth to Mr. Redcliffe.

This gentleman now said to our hero, "Tell me, Christian, everything connected with your earlier years: reveal to me in fullest detail all that regards yourself and your sister, from your most infantile recollections down to the period when I first became acquainted with you in London. Do not think it is mere idle curiosity on my part: but I feel so deep an interest in your amiable sister and yourself, that everything which in any way concerns you is of importance in my estimation."

Christian proceeded to comply with his benefactor's request: his narrative was however concise enough, and was speedily told.

"To-morrow," said Mr. Redcliffe, "immediately after breakfast you shall go and fetch your sister to pass the day with us. I will give you a note for the Princess Indora, so that her assent shall at once be conceded. Ah! and request your sister, my dear Christian, to bring with her those little relics to which you have just alluded in your narrative: for, as I have said, everything that regards you has an interest in my eyes——and—and I have a curiosity to see those cherished objects which belonged to your deceased mother, and which your uncle Mr. Ashton placed in your hands when you were both old enough to receive possession of them and to appreciate it."

We need not further extend the description of this touching and pathetically exciting scene which took place between Mr. Redcliffe and our hero. Suffice it to say that the remainder of the evening was passed in most friendly conversation on the part of the benefactor and the recipient of his bounties; so that when Christian retired to his couch, he had every reason to felicitate himself upon this evening as being one of the happiest and most fortunate in his somewhat chequered existence.

Immediately after breakfast in the morning, Christian repaired to the villa of the Princess Indora; and on arriving there, he was most fervently embraced by his loving and delighted sister. From the Princess he experienced a most cordial welcome; and such was the state of his own feelings, with all his present prospects of happiness, that he did not perceive how for a moment

Indora trembled, and how the colour went and came on her magnificent countenance, as he presented to her Clement Redcliffe's letter. She retired to another apartment to peruse it; and the twins were left alone together. Then Christian informed his sister of everything that had taken place between himself and Mr. Redcliffe on the preceding evening; and our amiable young heroine was infinitely rejoiced to hear that her beloved brother need no longer consider himself dependent on the precarious chances of employment for the means of subsistence.

By the time Christian's explanations were finished, the Princess of Inderabad returned to the room where she had left them together; and her Highness at once intimated to Christina that it was with infinite pleasure she granted the request conveyed in Mr. Redcliffe's note. But if the twins had been more accustomed to penetrate into the human heart—if they had more curiosity in studying the looks of individuals — they might have suspected that there was more in Mr. Red-Redcliffe's billet than a mere request that Christina might be spared for the day; they would have fancied there was something which was of peculiar interest and importance to the Indian lady likewise.

While on their way in a hired vehicle from Bayswater to Mortimer Street, the twins had leisure for additional explanations. Christian made his delighted sister acquainted with the change that had taken place in respect to Isabella Vincent—how she had become possessed of an immense fortune—and how in her altered position she had renewed the assurances of love and constancy towards our hero. And then Christina recited, in fuller details than she had written to her brother when he was at Ramsgate, the particulars of the outrage she had undergone when she was forcibly carried off from the villa, and when she was rescued by Lord Octavian Meredith. The artless girl concealed nothing: she explained to her brother all that had occurred between herself and the young nobleman; and while Christian expressed his approval of the course she had adopted, he could not help saying to her in a low, tender, compassionating voice, "I am afraid, my sweet sister, that your affections are indeed more or less centred in Lord Octavian?"

"Christian," replied the weeping, blushing girl, "I have striven—heaven alone can tell how I have striven—to banish that image from my mind; and I have not been able! I have prayed to God to succour and uphold me in my task: but my very prayers have seemed to impress that image all the more forcibly on the memory of your unhappy sister. I should deem myself very guilty, were it not that I know that we poor weak mortals have no power over volition—and all that we can do is to prevent such circumstances as these from leading us into error."

"Error, my dearest sister!" exclaimed Christian: "mention not that word in connexion with your own pure and virtuous self!"

Christina pressed her brother's hand in token of gratitude for the confidence he thus reposed in her, and of which she knew herself to be so completely worthy; and then she said in a tremulous, hesitating voice, "Must I to Mr. Redcliffe make all these revelations?"

Christian did not immediately answer: he reflected profoundly. At length he said, "No, my sweet sister—these are matters too sacred to be discussed save and except with a very near and dear relative. Mr. Redcliffe is my benefactor,—and nothing more. I love him—we must both love him: and if he should demand your fullest confidence in all and every respect, even to your most secret thoughts — *then* must you speak frankly. But not of your own accord, dear Christina, need you volunteer explanations: it would be with unnecessary spontaneousness inflicting pain upon yourself. Ah! I recollect, in reference to that outrage which made my blood boil, dearest Christina—I wrote to Mr. Redcliffe from Ramsgate, telling him what had happened, immediately after the receipt of your letter describing the circumstances: for I have constantly been in the habit of thus communicating with him who has now proved so generous a benefactor. He asssured me last night that he is not ignorant who the vile authoress of the outrage was, and that she will be punished for that and other offences which have come to his knowledge."

The vehicle now stopped at Mrs. Macaulay's house; and that female herself came forth to welcome Christina.

"Dear me, Miss Ashton!" exclaimed the garrulous landlady, "how wonderfully you have improved since last I saw you! I was telling your brother yesterday that he too had improved: but really in respect to yourself——"

"My dear Mrs. Macaulay," said Christina, smiling and blushing, "you are pleased to compliment me: but I can assure you——"

"Oh, no compliment at all!" interjected the garrulous landlady: "you are the most beautiful creature that ever honoured the threshold of my house by crossing it. Ah! and there is that odious Mrs. Sifkin looking out of her parlour-window—and she will be ready to eat her own head off with spite at seeing such an elegant young gentleman and such a charming young lady entering at my door."

"Rather an impossible feat for Mrs. Sifkin to perform—is it not, Mrs. Macaulay?" observed Christian, smiling good-naturedly; "and certainly one far transcending the importance of the occasion."

"Oh, you know not the spite of that odious woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay. "It was but the other day she told Mrs. Bunkley, which does my mangling——Ah! I forgot," ejaculated the worthy woman, suddenly interrupting herself, "I have such news for you! Only look here—in yesterday's paper, amongst the list of Bankrupts—Mr. Samuel Emmanuel of the great Clothing Emporium! Gone all to smashes—and serve him right! That great coarse vulgar-looking wife of his won't be hung with massive gold chains any more, like a turkey with sausages at Christmas. But I see that you are in a hurry; and Mr. Redcliffe is waiting anxiously for you both."

Mrs. Macaulay—who had hitherto barred the way in the passage, that she might indulge in her garrulous propensities and have this little chat with the twins—now stepped aside; and they were enabled to pass her. They ascended to Mr. Redcliffe's sitting-apartment, where Christina experienced the kindest welcome from that gentleman. After a little conversation Mr. Redcliffe inquired whether

she had brought with her those memorials of her long deceased mother, which, through Christian, he had expressed a wish to behold?

"Yes," answered our heroine, with a tone and look of tender sadness, as she produced a small casket of oriental workmanship, and which was one of the numerous gifts she had received from the Princess of Inderabad.

Mr. Redcliffe took the casket from her hand—and opened it with as reverential an air as the twins themselves could have displayed when proceeding to the contemplation of memorials that so intimately concerned themselves. First he drew forth a long tress of raven hair—a tress which we have described in an earlier chapter of this narrative as one that must have constituted part of a luxuriant mass which might have formed the glory of a queen—aye, or the envy of a queen!—and while he surveyed it with a long and earnest attention, the brother and sister instinctively wound their arms about each other's neck, and pressed each other's hand, as they exchanged looks of unspeakable fondness. Then Mr. Redcliffe drew forth from the casket a beautiful gold watch of delicate fashion and exquisite workmanship; and as he contemplated it, the tears trickled down his cheeks.

"He feels for us," whispered Christian to his sister: "this excellent kind-hearted man—the most generous benefactor we have ever known—feels for our orphan condition."

"Yes—Mr. Redcliffe can appreciate," responded Christina, "the feelings with which you and I, dear brother, have been wont to gaze for hours and hours on the memorials of a mother who was snatched from us ere we had intelligence to comprehend her loss!"

Clement Redcliffe now opened another little packet which he took from the casket; and this packet contained two rings. One has been already described as a wedding-ring: the other, likewise a lady's, was of no considerable value but of exquisite workmanship. And now Mr. Redcliffe proceeded to the window with these two rings; and as he contemplated them, his back was turned towards the orphans. There he remained for at least five minutes—motionless as a statue—with his eyes evidently riveted upon the rings; and the orphans did not approach him. They still felt persuaded that in the goodness of his heart he was deeply touched on their account, while surveying these relics of their long dead mother. It was altogether a scene of the most pathetic interest; and the tears were trickling down the beautifully handsome face of Christian and the sweetly beautiful countenance of Christina.

Mr. Redcliffe at length turned slowly away from the window. His complexion, which has been described as being made up of sallowness bronzed with the sun, now appeared of a dead white: his face was indeed ghastly pale. That cold stern look which he habitually wore, and which was almost saturnine, chilling the beholder who was unaccustomed to it—had totally disappeared, and was succeeded by one of the deepest melancholy: but it was a mournfulness that had something awfully solemn in it. He advanced towards the twins; and taking their hands he said, in a voice that was scarcely audible, "My dear children—for as such I am to look upon you henceforth—I can weep with you over those memorials of the mother who died in your infancy! You love and revere her memory——Oh! never fail thus to cherish—thus to cling to it!—for it is sweet to think of a departed parent who is now a saint in heaven!"

At the same moment the same idea struck the twins;—simultaneously too were their looks bent in eager anxious inquiry upon Mr. Redcliffe's countenance: and their lips gave utterance at the same moment to precisely the same words.

"Our mother—did you know her?"

Mr. Redcliffe turned aside—raised his hand to his brow—and for an instant seemed to stagger as if under the influence of a hurricane of memories sweeping through his brain. The orphans watched him with a still more earnest gaze—a still more anxious interest than before: for they felt as if they stood upon the threshold of hitherto unanticipated revealings.

"Yes—I knew her," slowly responded Mr. Redcliffe, again turning towards the brother and sister: "I knew your poor mother! It is this circumstance, my dear children, which inspires me with so vivid an interest on your behalf——But you must ask me no questions at present—I can tell you nothing more yet! The time may shortly come when——But do not press me now! Above all things, breathe not a syllable elsewhere of what has taken place between us! Let it be sufficient for you to know that in me you have found one who will watch over your interests—who will study your welfare—and who will be unto you both as a friend, a guardian, and a father!"

Mr. Redcliffe folded the twins in his arms, and wept over them. They knelt at his feet, murmuring forth in broken voices the expressions of their gratitude: for it was sweet indeed—Ah, it was sweet for this youthful brother and sister to possess the friendship, the guardianship, and the love of one who had known their mother! He raised them up from their kneeling posture: again he embraced them both; and then relocking the casket, he said to Christina, "Keep you these valuables, my dear girl, with the most sedulous care!—keep them, I say, not merely as the memorials of your deceased mother, but as objects which may sooner or later prove of importance in another sense."

"Will you keep them for us?" asked both the twins, speaking as it were in the same breath.

Mr. Redcliffe reflected for a moment: and then he said, "Yes, I will keep them!—but I hope and trust it will only be for a short while that I may thus feel it safer to take charge of these valuables—and then shall they be restored unto you. Ask me nothing more now—and let us turn the conversation upon other subjects."

Mr. Redcliffe hastened to lock up the casket in a secure place; and the remainder of the day was passed by himself and the orphans with that affectionate and friendly intercourse which naturally followed the scenes that had taken place, and the new light in which they respectively stood—namely, he as their guardian and protector, and they as the grateful recipients of his kindness and his bounty.

CHAPTER XC.

THE SMEDLEYS AGAIN.

WE must once more request the reader to accompany us to the Smedleys' habitation situated in one of those narrow streets which lie between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. The house had precisely the same appearance as when we first described it in an earlier chapter of this narrative—with the difference that there was a neatly written card in one of the windows, announcing lodgings to let. The brass plate on the front door, indicating the avocation of Mr. Smedley as a goldbeater, was well polished, as was its wont: the gilt arm, clutching the hammer in its fist as a farther illustration of that individual's calling, was equally resplendent. The two windows of the first floor had their dark moreen curtains and their white blinds as usual; and Mr. Smedley himself was as constant an attendant at the chapel next door as when we first introduced him to our reader.

It was evening—and Mr. and Mrs. Smedley were seated together in their little parlour on the ground floor. There was a bottle of spirits upon the table; and the somewhat inflamed countenance of Bab Smedley showed that she had been indulging in her predilection for strong waters. Not however that she had imbibed thereof so copiously on the present occasion as to affect her reason—but only sufficient to render her somewhat sharper and more querulous in her observations to her husband. They were discussing the circumstances of their position, and deliberating on the plans which they ought to adopt: but it was in low whispering voices that they for the most part addressed each other,—though every now and then the woman's ejaculations became louder with the petulant impatience of her utterance; and then Jack Smedley would interpose a timid and hasty "Hush!"

Presently Mrs. Smedley, consulting her husband's silver watch which lay upon the table, said, "It is close upon nine o'clock, Jack: you must be off with that money."

"And I will just take a few of those religious tracts," said Smedley, rising from his seat: "because if I happen to be seen putting anything into those chaps' hands, and if any question is asked, I can easily declare that it was one of these godly publications."

"Be off with you, with your godly publications!" ejaculated Bab Smedley with an air of supreme disgust: and she forthwith proceeded to mix herself another glass of spirits and water.

Jack Smedley wrapped a pound's worth of silver in a piece of paper, and deposited the little packet in his waistcoat pocket. He took a handful of the religious tracts; and saying to his wife, "When I come back we will continue our deliberations,"—he issued from the house.

Glancing hastily up and down the narrow street with the anxious look of a man whose conscience was not so pure that he had nothing to dread, Jack Smedley continued his way. To two or three of his neighbours who were standing on their thresholds, as the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods are accustomed to do, he addressed a passing observation in a tone of the most friendly familiarity: but it was only a very cold response that in each instance he received. Muttering to himself an imprecation against the individuals who were thus frigid towards him, Smedley continued his way; and in about ten minutes he reached Mint Street. Some little improvement had within the last few years been made in this neighbourhood: but it was still at the time at which we are writing—as it also is at the present day—the resort of all society's lowest and vilest outcasts.

Every now and then Jack Smedley looked back to see if he were followed by any suspicious individual; and in order to give a colour to his visit to this vile neighbourhood, he occasionally put a tract into some hand that was thrust forth with the expectation of receiving alms. This proceeding on Mr. Smedley's part brought down upon him the curse of disappointment or the gibe of ridicule: but he cared not.

At length Mr. Smedley reached the corner of a narrow diverging street, or rather miserable obscure alley; and there he beheld a couple of ill-looking, squalid, ragged youths, standing together. These were the brothers Bill and Tim Scott; and in no way was their hideous personal appearance altered since we first introduced them to the reader.

Now Jack Smedley glanced around him with even a more searching anxiety than he had previously displayed: but flattering himself that the coast was perfectly clear, so far as any suspicious-looking individual was concerned, he took the little packet of money from his waistcoat-pocket, and thrust it into the outstretched hand of Bill Scott. The large goggle eyes of the miserable being glistened with a greedy delight; and his stunted brother Tim, catching hold of Jack Smedley's sleeve, asked impatiently, "How much have you gived him? cos why he's safe to bilk his own brother, if so be he has a chance!"

"You'll find a pound in that paper," responded the gold-beater quickly. "But don't detain me!—and for heaven's sake don't stand looking about in the street, or go and get drunk at any boozing-ken and make fools of yourselves."

"Never you mind us, Mr. Smedley!" said Bill Scott, the elder brother. "But what of Barney? Is he took agin?—or has nuffin been heard on him?"

"Nothing," replied Smedley; "and he has not been retaken—at least not to my knowledge. I always look at the newspaper——"

"Well, I s'pose Barney will turn up agin some of these here days," said Bill Scott: "and the sooner the better—for I'm getting unkimmon tired of this here hide-and-seek sort of a life."

"You ought to be thankful," responded Smedley, "that you've got such a good friend in me. But I can't stop another moment. This day week—at precisely the same hour——"

"Where is it to be?" asked Bill Scott.

"Where?"—and after an instant's musing, Jack Smedley added, "At the back of St. George's Church."

Having thus spoken, the goldbeater turned upon his heel, and retraced his way rapidly along Mint Street—taking care however the while to be more profuse in his tract-distribution than while proceeding in the contrary direction. Frequent were the anxious glances which he rapidly flung around:

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but he had no particular reason to suspect that he was watched, dogged, or followed.

We must however see what had in the meantime been taking place at his own house. Immediately after his departure Bab Smedley took a deep draught from the tumbler which she had just filled; and she was sitting in rumination on the topics of their recent discourse,—when a knock at the front door startled the woman from her reverie. It was not a single knock—it was not precisely a double one, in the usual acceptance of the term, which means a series of strokes: but it was something between the two. Bab Smedley took up the candle from the table, and hastened to answer the summons. The person whom she found at the door was a middle-aged man—of quiet, sedate, respectable appearance — plainly but decently dressed—and who looked like a clerk or small tradesman.

"Are you the mistress of the house?" asked the individual, with a bow that was sufficiently polite.

"I am, sir," responded Bab,—"and the master too, for that matter!" she thought within herself: for she experienced an unmitigated contempt for her husband, and the feeling was inseparable from her ideas.

"Can I say a few words to you?" asked the stranger.

"To be sure!" replied Mrs. Smedley, without however making the slightest move as an invitation for the individual to enter.

"You have lodgings to let?" he said; but looking about him as much as to imply that he would rather speak to her in-doors.

"We *had*, sir," Mrs. Smedley immediately responded; "but they were let this afternoon to a very respectable old couple that have known us for a great many years."

"And yet the bill is still up in the window?" said the applicant, stepping back a pace or two to assure himself by another glance that such was the fact.

"Oh, is it?" said Mrs. Smedley coolly. "Then I forgot to take it down—and I will do so at once. I am sorry you should have had the trouble, sir——"

"Oh, no trouble! But perhaps you may have a spare room—I only want one——"

"No spare room now, sir. Good evening to you:"—and Bab Smedley shut the door in the face of the applicant, who seemed much inclined to keep her in discourse.

She returned into the parlour, and at once took down the card announcing that lodgings were to be let. She evidently did not much like the visit; and reseating herself, fell into a gloomy reverie, which was only occasionally interrupted by a recurrence to the spirits-and-water. In about twenty minutes after the little incident we have described, Jack Smedley returned; and Bab at once vented her ill-humour upon him.

"What was the use of your keeping that card stuck up in the window? I told you more than once that I would not have it; and yet——"

"But, my dear Bab, do hear reason!" interrupted her husband, as he resumed his seat at the table.

"Yes—when you can talk it, and not before!" exclaimed the vigaro. "But what have you done?"

"Those hungry dogs," responded Jack, "were at the place of appointment, waiting for their weekly money; and I told them where to be the next time it falls due. But don't you think Bab it is a very hard thing we should have to allow these fellows a pound a week——"

"How can we help ourselves?" demanded Mrs. Smedley. "Isn't there a warrant out for Bill Scott's apprehension? and isn't he therefore obliged to play at hide-and-seek? and if his brother Tim was to go out prigging in order to keep them both, wouldn't he be dogged and followed, so that Bill would be certain to be arrested? There's no doubt it's hard enough upon us—but we can't help ourselves. As for that card there——"

"Now do listen, Bab!" said her husband entreatingly. "When that cursed business at Liverpool exploded, and your mother got into her present trouble, weren't we obliged to do all we could to keep up the appearance of our own respectability? Didn't we assure the neighbours that it was totally impossible Mrs. Webber could have committed the deed—that there was some terrible mistake—and that her innocence would transpire on the trial?"

"And the neighbours don't believe us," interjected Bab, sullenly.

"No—I'm sorry to say they don't altogether believe us," responded her husband; "or at least don't know exactly what to think. They speak cool and look distant: but I do my best to ride it with a high hand, and seem as if I did not notice their altered behaviour. Well, I advised that the card should be kept up in the window as usual, just as if we felt our own respectability to be totally unimpaired, and as if we were at least conscious of our own innocence. Besides, the keeping up of the card was only a blind: for we agreed that we would not let the lodgings even if anybody applied: because you and I have always so many things to talk about now, and we must not stand the chance of being overheard. And then too, the Burker may turn up at any moment —for Barney is such a desperate fellow, he's almost certain to find his way to London—and if he does, he would be sure to come to us, the worst luck on it!"

"There's enough!" ejaculated Mrs. Smedley. "Some one has been to apply for the lodgings; and I don't like his appearance a bit, I can tell you."

"Who?" asked the goldbeater, with a look full of startled anxiety.

"Ah! who?" ejaculated Bab. "How do I know? But who should come prying about this place here, and trying on all sorts of dodges to get in amongst us for more reasons than one——"

"Do you—do you think he was a—a—detective?" asked Jack Smedley, with an awful elongation of his pale countenance.

"As like as not!" rejoined Bab petulantly. "However, I stalled him off—I told him the lodgings were let to a decent old couple—I was precious short with him—and I shut the door. Now, the fact is, Jack, things can't go on like this: I am getting uncommon tired of living constantly on the fidgets——"

"Not more tired than me, I know!" exclaimed her husband. "Didn't I propose a bolt to France

immediately after your mother got into trouble? but it was you that said we must stick here at all hazards; and when we decided to remain, I did the best I could to keep up a show of respectability——"

"Of course I said we would remain!" ejaculated Mrs. Smedley. "Do you think that the house wasn't constantly watched after mother went down to Liverpool to Lettice Rodney's trial? and it would have been madness for us to have thought of a move—suspicion would have been excited in a moment. But after that girl Rodney's trial things looked better for us—though they went so dead against mother——"

"Yes—I know the detective said at Lettice Rodney's trial," observed Jack Smedley, "that he had nothing to allege against *our* respectability."

"Well, then," continued Bab, "it was better for us to go on living here: but when two or three weeks back people began asking how it was that the old lodger of our's disappeared so suddenly in the winter——"

"Ah! that was the thing that began to frighten me too," interjected the goldbeater; "and then came the news of the Burker's escape, and the fright we've been in lest he should come here to get us both into such trouble that we could never hope to get out of it——"

"That is nothing," interrupted Bab, "in comparison with the other thing we were speaking about before you went out to meet those Scotts."

"Ah! you mean your mother?" said Jack Smedley, with a significant look, at the same time that he drew his chair closer to his wife. "Do you—do you really think," he asked, with a very pale face, "that the old woman is likely to peach?"

"I didn't think so at first," answered Bab—"or else I shouldn't have insisted that we were to remain here. But lately, the more I've thought over the matter the more I am convinced there is every thing to be dreaded in that quarter. There's no use disguising the fact, Jack—you never was a favourite with mother: and as for any love for me, her daughter—it's all nonsense! If she thought she could do herself any good by turning round upon us and telling how two or three have gone down there——"

"Yes, yes—I know!" said Jack Smedley shuddering, as his wife pointed in a downward direction. "But the quicklime——"

"Well, the quicklime has no doubt done its work long ago," interrupted Bab, "even in respect to that man Smith—or Preston, I should say——"

"By the bye," interrupted Jack, "what have you done with his letter—you know—and also the packet of papers we took out from under the flooring of his house in Cambridge Terrace?"

"Never mind the papers!" exclaimed Bab petulantly: "I have put them where they are safe enough—though little use they ever stand the chance of being to us or our affairs: for when we made secret inquiries about those young Ashtons, we heard they were living in a wretched poor lodging in Camden Town, and hadn't the means of rewarding any one who would give them up those papers. It has been of no use to make any inquiries since: for it is not very likely their condition is much improved. But let us return to what we were saying——"

"Yes—about your mother?" suggested Jack Smedley.

"Well then, about my mother," continued Bab. "You know what my opinion is—I tell you that mother will peach if it answers her purpose. She has not sent us any reply to the two or three letters we have written, and which I so carefully worded that she could not fail to understand the game we had to play——"

"Perhaps she is offended," observed Jack Smedley, "at our writing in that sort of sanctimonious strain?"

"Offended?—nonsense!" exclaimed Bab. "How could she be offended? She knows very well that we must be aware all letters going to her would be opened by the gaol-authorities, and that we were therefore compelled to write in a particular way. But never mind all this!—it is of no use arguing the point. I tell you that if mother lives on to go through her trial and be condemned to death, she will peach as sure as you are Jack Smedley!"

"If she lives?" said the man, catching at those words which appeared to have some covert meaning.

"Yes—if she lives," answered Bab, repeating those words. "And therefore she must *not* live—and if you are a man, Jack——"

"I am man enough to do anything to secure our safety," responded the goldbeater. "Only show me how——"

"Now look you!" replied Bab: "I understand mother well enough—and a great deal better than you do. She would like to put herself out of the way before the trial comes on——of *that* I am convinced! But if the trial is once over, and she is condemned to death, and the croaking parsons get hold of her, you may depend upon it she will out with everything!"

"Then what is to be done?" asked Jack Smedley.

"What is to be done?" echoed his wife, with an air of mingled impatience and contempt: "what *should* be done but for you to——" and she whispered a few words in the ears of her husband.

"But would you have me do this?" he asked, gazing upon her as if he thought that she could scarcely be in earnest, or that she meant to put him to a test for some other and ulterior purpose.

"Of course I would!" rejoined the fiend-like woman: "everything for our own safety! Let what will happen to the Burker, we know that he is staunch; and I feel convinced that nothing could induce him to turn round upon his pals. The more savage and ferocious a person is, the more sure is he or she to be true to friends and associates. As for those Scotts—we will get them safe out of the country; and then, if once mother is put out of the way, we have got little or nothing to fear."

"Well, I don't know," said Jack Smedley, in a sort of dismayed musing—"I had a very bad dream last night. I thought the black cat was scouring all over the house—that some strange man came in to look after her—that she cut down stairs into the scullery—hid herself underneath the table—and therefore sate right upon that trap-door——"

"Stuff and nonsense, with your black cats!" cried Bab Smedley.

"Just wait a moment," interposed Jack. "I thought that the strange man went down into the scullery—found the cat there—discovered the trap-door—and then all in an instant turned into a policeman. But you know, Bab, that the night we did that last piece of business—I mean Preston's affair—the cat did cut about the house in such a strange way that I told you at the time I didn't like it: it seemed an omen of evil. But really," asked Jack, abruptly, "what is to prevent us from making a bolt now? Why not get over to France? We may then dispense with this new business about your mother—we need not care what happens to the Burker—and we shall no longer have to pension those Scotts."

"And what if the police have their eye upon us?" demanded Mrs. Smedley: "what if that man who came to-night is a detective who wants to get into the house under pretence of being a lodger, that he may all the better play the spy upon us? I tell you I am certain that if we were to make such a move as would show we intended flight, we should both be pounced upon at once on some pretence or another. It is only by staying here, and seeming to rely on our respectability, that we are safe. The police are evidently puzzled about us: they don't know what to think—they fancy we may be all right—and as long as we give them no cause to think otherwise, we are safe. They may try by all kinds of dodges to know more of us and peer into our secrets: but there's no chance of their going to the length of laying hands upon us. We must therefore use the opportunity we now have to get rid of obstacles and overcome perils—so as to make ourselves completely safe. Now, that is my view of the matter—and it *must* be acted upon," added Bab peremptorily.

"But what if I go to Liverpool?" asked Jack, considerably re-assured, though not completely so, by his wife's arguments.

"Natural enough!" she exclaimed,—"to see your mother-in-law—to remonstrate with her on her wickedness if she is guilty—to console and strengthen her if she is innocent! Will those reasons do, Jack? Come now, you have played the sanctimonious long enough amongst those snivelling, canting, whining hypocrites next door"—alluding to the chapel—"to be able to perform the same part with great effect at Liverpool. Take a clean white cravat with you—put on your longest face—and don't fear as to the result. What you require is fortunately in the house——"

"How?" exclaimed Smedley.

"The phial of prussic acid," rejoined his wife. "Don't you remember, we found it amongst Preston's effects? Forger as he was, and always trembling at the idea of being arrested, he no doubt had the poison in readiness for any moment. It is lucky for our present purpose; because it would otherwise be dangerous for you just now to go out and buy it."

We need not chronicle any more of the discourse which took place between this delectable husband and wife: suffice it to say that everything was settled between them for the carrying out of their nefarious purpose. At an early hour in the morning Jack Smedley went amongst two or three of his neighbours, with the intimation that he was going to Liverpool to see his mother-in-law; and he officiously undertook to execute whatsoever commissions they might choose to charge him with. He however received cold and distant responses, to which he had been lately accustomed: but his present purpose was answered—he had openly declared his intention of visiting Liverpool—and if there were really police spies in the neighbourhood, they could not think that he meditated a total flight altogether.

To Liverpool Mr. Smedley repaired: and in the evening he arrived in that town. It was too late for him to see his mother-in-law: but on the following morning, at the earliest hour permitted by the prison regulations, he was introduced into her cell. He found the old woman still in bed; and when he made his appearance, she surveyed him with looks of mingled spite, mistrust, and aversion.

"Well, mother-in-law," said Jack, when the turnkey had retired, "as you didn't write to us, Bab and I thought the best thing to be done was for me to run down and see you."

"I wish I had never seen you at all!" answered Mrs. Webber growlingly,—"never in all my life! It was you who concocted this precious business that has got me into such trouble; and, O dear! O dear! to think how it will end—to think how it will end!"

The wretched woman sate up in bed, and rocked herself to and fro as she thus spoke. She was frightfully altered. Thin and emaciated, she was worn almost to a skeleton—not by remorse for the crimes she had committed—but with horror at the incessant contemplation of the penalty she would soon have to pay for them. There was something fearful in the expression of her countenance: she seemed like a starved tiger-cat that could have sprung at any one approaching, as if to avenge the doom that appeared certain to overtake herself. Jack Smedley was frightened by her look—while her words seemed to justify all the misgivings which her daughter Barbara had entertained concerning her.

"Come, mother-in-law," he said, plucking up his presence of mind as well as he was able; "don't be angry with me—I did all for the best."

"And the worst has come of it!" interjected Mrs. Webber sharply; "and I have got to bear all its brunt. I tell you what, Jack," she went on to say, her eyes glaring with fierceness upon him,—"those who commit crimes in concert, should also share the punishment in concert: or else there's no fairness and no justice! I feel as if I was made a scapegoat of——"

"Nonsense, mother-in-law!" exclaimed Jack Smedley. "When people embark in these sort of things, they each and all take their fair and equal chance. It might have happened to Bab—it might have happened to me——"

"*You!* you white-livered scoundrel!" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, with a look of withering contempt: "you would have turned round and peached on all the rest the very first instant. Bab too is as selfish as she can be. Look at the letters you have both written me!—full of that canting nonsense of your's, the infection of which Bab seems to have caught!"

"How could we write otherwise?" asked Smedley. "Come, do be reasonable, mother-in-law——"

"Reasonable indeed!" cried the wretched woman:

" am I not in a state that is enough to drive one mad? You and my daughter are all for yourselves—you wrote to me when you should have come——"

"The house was watched by the police," interjected Smedley: "and therefore——"

"How is it, then, that you are here now?" demanded Mrs. Webber sharply: "and what devil's business has brought you to me? Can you help me to escape, Jack?—can you with all your art and cunning set me free, as the Burker has liberated himself?"

"If it were possible," responded Smedley, "I should——"

"Possible!" cried Mrs. Webber, contemptuously. "Nothing is possible with you, except sneaking villany and covert cowardly crime. But anything bold—no, nothing of the sort! Look you, Jack Smedley—if I go to the scaffold it shall not be alone!"

"Mother-in-law!" he ejaculated vehemently.

"Hold your tongue, and listen! Companionship is always sweet—and not the less so in death. At all events it will be a consolation for me to know that I am not the most miserable person in existence at that last instant!"

"But, mother-in-law," faltered forth Jack Smedley, with a countenance white as a sheet, "would you hang your own daughter?"

"She leaves me here to be hanged!" retorted the woman fiercely: "she does not come near me!"

"She has sent you plenty of money, mother-in-law," interposed Jack in accents of remonstrance and deprecation.

"Yes—to fee counsel in a hopeless cause!" cried Mrs. Webber. "I tell you what it is—I feel in that state of mind that I could wreak a vengeance upon the whole world!—all the bonds of kith and kin are broken!—I know nobody but enemies! That is my state of mind! And if you had the gibbet looming ever before your eyes—if you had a sensation as of a cord ever round your neck—if you had night and day to look death in the face—you, Jack Smedley, would feel even worse than I do. It is enough to drive one crazed—crazed—crazed!"

Again the old woman rocked herself to and fro; and her son-in-law felt as if his purpose were completely frustrated. He knew not what to say next: there was a perfect consternation in his mind: he thought that she might even denounce him as the accomplice of her numerous crimes, the instant the turnkey should come back to conduct him away from her cell.

"Jack Smedley," she said, at length breaking a somewhat long pause, "tell me for what purpose you have come here now. If I thought it was to serve me in any way—if I thought you had the courage to furnish me the means of escape——"

"Tell me what those means are, mother-in-law," quickly ejaculated the goldbeater; "and I promise you they shall be forthcoming. Do you want a file—a crowbar—a rope-ladder——"

"Fool!" interrupted the old woman with bitterest scorn, "how can I, a poor weak feeble creature, reduced to the mere shadow of what I was,—how can I accomplish that which a strong powerful determined man, as the Burker, could only just succeed in effecting? No—it is not by such means as those that I may escape hence! But there is something which will enable me to evade the ordeal of trial—the horror of condemnation—aye, and that last hideous frightful scene which I shudder to contemplate! And more too—it is something that will save me from the horrible chance of betraying my own daughter in my madness!"

"And that something?" ejaculated Smedley, with the almost breathless eagerness of suspense.

Mrs. Webber looked very hard at him for nearly a minute; and then a word—a single word—came in a slow whisper from her lips—a word which made her son-in-law start suddenly, although what she had previously said had more than half prepared him for the climax.

And that one word was—"Poison!"

"Do you mean it, mother-in-law?" he asked, clutching her wrist and looking her intently in the face.

"I mean it!" she responded. "But of what use," was her immediate contemptuous addition, "is it for me to make such a request, since I already see that your craven heart——"

"Enough, mother-in-law!—you do not understand me," hurriedly whispered the goldbeater. "I have poison with me!"

"Poison with you?" she echoed, a wild joy flashing forth in unearthly light from her eyes. "Is it possible? But how? You are not deceiving me?"

"No, no—I am not deceiving you," rejoined the goldbeater quickly. "Can you not understand that Bab and I feel ourselves to be environed by dangers? Yes—we know that we are standing upon a mine which may explode at any instant. Therefore we are prepared! We have breathed a solemn vow that the hangman's cord shall never touch our necks. On this we are resolved! Do you remember the phial of poison——"

"Ah! the prussic acid," said Mrs. Webber, eagerly, "which was found amongst Preston's effects?"

"The same!" rejoined Smedley. "There is the phial—it contains half the fluid which originally filled it. Bab has the other half."

"And will you give it to me?" demanded the woman, yearning for the deadly venom with as strong an avidity as if she were famished and it was food that she was imploring: "will you surrender up your share? can you for once in your life, Jack Smedley, do a generous action?"

The goldbeater pretended to hesitate for a few moments: but if his simulated hesitation had only lasted an instant longer, that fierce tiger-cat—his mother-in-law—would have flown at him to tear the phial from his grasp.

"Yes—take it!" he said, just in time to prevent such a scene: and he placed the phial in her hand.

"Oh, to cheat the gallows! to avoid the hangman! to escape the horrors of the gazing crowd!"—and the woman in an unnatural frenzy of joy pressed the phial to her lips.

"But my dear mother-in-law," whispered Jack Smedley, bending down towards her ear, "you will not take that poison for two or three days?—you will not compromise me?"

"No—I can afford to spare you now," answered Mrs. Webber: "for you have done me at least

one service in my lifetime—a service that gives me the means of death! And now go—leave me! I am no puling foolish creature that can descend to slobbering farewells and sickly leave-takings ——But stay one moment! You need not tell Bab that I hinted in my frenzy at the idea of betraying either you or her: for I should not have done it —— it was mere madness at the time! And now go."

She waved her hand to her son-in-law, who opening the little trap at the door of the cell, called for the turnkey who was stationed at a grating at the end of the passage; and that functionary speedily arrived to afford Jack Smedley egress from the prisoner's chamber.

CHAPTER XCI.

THE SUBTERRANEAN.

It was evening, some five or six days after the interview of Jack Smedley with his mother-in-law; and his wife Barbara sate alone in the little parlour at their abode in London. She was reflecting upon what her husband had done at Liverpool, and bestowing an equal part of her attention on the glass of spirits-and-water which stood on the table. She had been rendered aware of Jack Smedley's successful mission to Mrs. Webber, inasmuch as he had written from Liverpool to his wife—but in a very guarded strain, for fear of the communication being intercepted. They had however agreed beforehand between themselves on some phrase that was to be introduced in case of success, while another phrase was to indicate failure. The former had found its introduction into the body of the epistle; and amidst a series of canting sentences and studied hypocrisies, the goldbeater thus found the means of setting his wife's mind at rest on the one grand important point.

Upon this she was cogitating—and dividing, as we have said, her attention between the subject of her thoughts and the liquor to which she had become so wedded. It was nine o'clock; and the servant-girl who attended for a certain period during the day, entered to inquire whether anything more were wanted from her this evening. A response was given in the negative: the girl took her departure; and Mrs. Smedley was now alone in the house. She knew not how it was—she could not account for it—but assuredly did it seem as if a chill smote her the instant the front door closed behind that girl. Bab Smedley was by no means the woman to yield to the influence of vague presentiments or ungrounded alarms: but she liked not this feeling which took possession of her—neither could she shake it off. She applied herself with additional vigour to the spirits-and-water: potations appeared to do her no good —on the contrary, they seemed to render her all the more nervous. Contemptuously as she had been wont to look upon her husband, she wished he was at home now for companionship's sake.

All of a sudden she fancied she heard a noise in the back part of the house; and for the first time in her life Bab Smedley was seized with such a terror that she could not rise from her chair to ascertain what the sound was. Then, as slowly recovering courage she looked around, she started on beholding the great black cat lying on a chair and gazing at her with its large green glassy eyes. She remembered the ominous instinct with which her husband's terrified imagination had endowed the animal on the night of Preston's murder; and she recoiled from the glare of those eyes.

The sound was renewed: this time she became aware that it was a knocking at the back door; and snatching up the candle, she proceeded from the room to answer the summons.

"It must be one of those Scotts—or else the Burker himself," she thought as she threaded the passage: "unless it is Jack come home and got himself into some scrape—for nobody else but one of these would come to the back door at this time of the evening."

She opened the door; and the light flashed upon the hang-dog countenance of Barney the Burker.

Bab Smedley exhibited no surprise; for, as the reader has seen, she was more or less prepared for such a visit. She hastily closed the door, and led the way into the parlour before a single word was spoken between them. The shutter was already fastened outside the window, over which the curtains inside were drawn; and thus there was no fear of the man's presence in that room being perceived from without. Filling Bab's tumbler completely up to the brim with the alcholic liquor, the Burker drained the contents at a draught; and beyond a slight brief winking of the eyes, no sign on his part indicated the strength or depth of the potation. He threw himself upon a seat,—saying, "So here I am at last, Bab, once more in London: though I can't say as how I'm werry sound in limb—or that I'm over sure of being safe in respect to that personal liberty which is the right of every free-born individual."

"And where do you come from?" inquired Mrs. Smedley, who had leisure to observe the careworn haggard appearance of the Burker, as well as to judge that he was sinking with fatigue.

"Ah! where do I come from?—that's the question!" he responded with a certain degree of rough bitterness in his tone. "Wheresomever there's a quiet ditch that a man may lay down in when he's got no bed—wheresomever there's a lonesome haystack that a houseless wanderer may snatch a snooze under—wheresomever there's fields and woods and all sorts of unfrequented places as far as possible from the towns and villages which a chap doesn't dare enter for fear of seeing a printed description of hisself with 'A Hundred Pound Reward' in big letters a-top, posted up agin the walls,—there's the places from which I come."

Having concluded this piece of eloquence after his own fashion, the Burker looked Mrs. Smedley very hard in the face for nearly a minute, as much as to say, "Well, what do you think of that?"—and then he brewed himself a tumbler of spirits-and-water, which he proceeded to drink at a more moderate rate than the previous one.

"Perhaps you would like something to eat?" suggested Mrs. Smedley.

"Well, now you mention it, I think I should like summut," answered the Burker; "though only a minute back I fancied I was past eating: for I ain't broke my fast since eight o'clock this morning—and then I should have got nuffin if I

hadn't gived a boy a couple of taps on the head to make him surrender a wedge of bread and cheese he was a-breakfasting on as he went to his work."

Mrs. Smedley proceeded to the larder—whence she quickly returned with some cold beef, bread, and pickles; and the Burker, falling to, speedily made a meal that would have sufficed for half-a-dozen ordinary appetites. Another tumbler was produced; and Mrs. Smedley joined him in the drinking department.

"And where's Jack?" he inquired in the midst of his repast.

"Jack's at Liverpool," rejoined Mrs. Smedley: and she explained the object of his mission, not forgetting to add her knowledge of its success, so far as that the phial of poison was conveyed to her mother's hand.

"Well I'm blowed," said the Burker, "if Jack hasn't proved hisself to be a feller of more pluck than I'd have gived him credit for. But why is he staying at Liverpool?"

"He thought it best to make a show of lingering there a bit, so that he might see the chaplain and a justice-of-the-peace or two, and snivel and whimper and play the hypocrite——"

"Ah!" interrupted the Burker, with a look of approval and envy, "Jack can come it strong in that there line. Well?"

"Because, don't you see," continued Bab, "if he had bolted off immediately after that interview with his mother-in-law, it might have been suspected that he gave her the poison: whereas by staying there for two or three days, and going and talking to the authorities—pretending that he was overwhelmed with grief—that he didn't know what to think, whether she had really committed the crime, or whether she was the innocent victim of circumstantial evidence——"

"Ah, that's the ticket!" ejaculated the Burker, with his mouth full of beef and bread: "nothing like coming the artful dodge——And who can do it better than my friend Jack Smedley?"

"And so, you see, Jack is stopping at Liverpool," continued Bab.

"What the deuce makes that there black cat of your'n stare so uncommon hard?" suddenly demanded the Burker.

The woman started: for the question which her companion had just put, all in a moment riveted the conviction that it had not ere now been mere fancy on her part. But unwilling to confess her fears to herself—still less to reveal them to the Burker—Bab Smedley instantaneously composed her countenance; and in a voice of assumed quiet, she said, "There's nothing wrong with the cat: she often looks like that."

"Then, if it was my cat, I'd pison it—that's what I'd do!" rejoined the Burker. "But how is things going on in London? I suppose you heerd tell of my escape——"

"I read it in the newspapers," answered the woman. "As for things in London, we've allowed the Scotts a pound a week—that's one thing: and I rather fancy this house is watched by the detectives—that's another thing."

"The deuce!" growled the Burker. "But I say, Bab——"

Scarcely were the words spoken, when a knock was heard at the front door—a somewhat commanding kind of summons, and which made both Bab Smedley and the Burker spring up to their feet.

"There's something wrong," hastily whispered the former: "I know there is!"

"I'll get out by the back," hastily responded the Burker. "But no!" he instantaneously ejaculated: "if there's a plant meant, there'll be people watching at the back. Come quick! I'll go down the trap—and you can pretend you was asleep and didn't hear the knocking at the door. You must stall 'em off somehow or another, Bab."

"Yes, yes—it's the only chance!"

As the reader may suppose this colloquy took place in very hurried whispers, and occupied far less time than we have taken in describing it. Away from the parlour they glided—Bab shading the light which she carried in her hand: down into the scullery they went—the table was moved away—the bit of carpet also—the trap-door was raised—and into the subterranean went the Burker. Then almost in the twinkling of an eye Bab Smedley restored the little place to its former appearance: she put three or four saucepans and articles of crockery, and other kitchen implements upon the table, to give it an air as if it had not been recently moved; and she sped up-stairs. Meanwhile the knocking had been repeated in a louder and more imperious manner than before: yet all that we have described since the first summons echoed through the house, had not taken more than three minutes.

The feeling that all her presence of mind was now absolutely necessary—or at least apprehending some emergency which would require this display of her courage—Bab Smedley smoothed her countenance; and with a light in her hand, she proceeded to open the front door. A tall stout man at once entered the passage, followed by another individual, a glance at whom showed Mrs. Smedley that it was the applicant for the vacant lodging of a few days previous. She kept her countenance admirably: and said, "Good evening, gentlemen. I suppose you've come to see Mr. Smedley on business: but he's not at home."

"Not at home, eh?" exclaimed the tall stout man. "Are you sure?" and he looked the woman very hard in the face.

"Quite sure," she replied with the coolest effrontery—which indeed was all the more natural inasmuch as at the instant she was telling the truth. "He's at Liverpool, sir; and if you want anything in the goldbeating way——"

"Shut the door, Tom," interrupted the tall man, turning round abruptly to his companion. "Beg pardon, ma'am," he continued, coolly walking into the parlour, whither Mrs. Smedley followed with the light; "but this is no time for ceremony. We're officers—and we want your husband."

"Officers!"—and Mrs. Smedley affected to give a shriek of dismay, as if quite unprepared for the intelligence that thus burst upon her. "Want my husband——"

"Yes—and I'm thinking we're likely to find him too," promptly rejoined the officer, as he glanced at the table. "A late supper, evidently served up in a hurry—no tablecloth, nor nothing tidy—and two tumblers! Come, ma'am, it's no

use playing the fool with us: your husband *is* in the house—and we must search for him. There's a couple of my men at the back part of the premises; and Tom there is keeping the front door. So there's no chance of escape. You had better——"

"Good heavens! what has my poor husband done?" exclaimed Mrs. Smedley, as if overwhelmed with grief. "But it is impossible! Jack is as quiet as the child unborn—and a pious man too—such a pious man!"

"I'm sorry to say," interrupted the detective officer—for such he was—"that if you don't really know anything about it already—you've lost your mother."

"My mother!" ejaculated Mrs. Smedley, with a great show of wild astonishment and grief: "you don't surely mean that she has been tried—and—and—already——"

"Executed?" said the officer, calmly finishing the sentence for Mrs. Smedley. "No—not exactly. She's cheated the hangman——In plain terms, ma'am, she poisoned herself in the middle of last night—your husband took the very first train from Liverpool this morning—he was telegraphed up—but somehow or another we just now missed him at the Euston Square Station—though we afterwards learnt that such a person did arrive this evening by that particular train. However, we know he must be here."

"My poor mother!" sobbed Mrs. Smedley. "But what could my husband——"

"Have to do with it?" ejaculated the officer. "Why, he gave her the poison as a matter of course! Who else could possibly have done it?"

"Oh, Sir, I can assure you Jack is incapable of such a thing! He went to Liverpool to see my poor mother—to teach her which was the right path if she had really gone into the wrong one——"

"Come, ma'am—this gammon won't do for us. Tom, let another of our people come in—and you follow me. Sorry to be rude, ma'am—very natural for you to try and screen your husband—but it won't do. Please to favour us with this light."

Bab Smedley had thrown herself upon a chair, in which she now sate rocking herself to and fro with every semblance of being utterly disconsolate, and likewise as if heedless of the words that were spoken to her.

The tall detective took up the candle; and followed by his man Tom, he passed into the back room. No one was there. They ascended the staircase; the upper chambers were speedily searched, but still without success. They descended: and Bab Smedley joined them in the passage,—saying, "Well, gentlemen, you see my husband is not in the house: but I almost wish he was, that he might convince you of the error under which you labour concerning him. A pious vessel like him—a deacon of the Shining Light's Chapel—it is out of the question! But you have behaved so civil in doing your duty, that I hope you'll just step into the parlour for a moment and take a small glass of something?"

"Stop a minute!" said the tall detective: "there's a place down stairs. Come along, Tom."

"Oh, well," said Bab Smedley, still admirably preserving her presence of mind, and simulating an air of mournfulness in which there was no betrayal of anxious apprehension, "you can speedily satisfy yourself in that quarter—and then you shall accept the little refreshment I offer you."

The two detectives descended the stairs,—Bab Smedley following, to procure, as she said, two or three more glasses. Her conduct appeared so natural—her part was performed with such consummate skill—that the detectives began really to think her husband could not be any where about the premises; at the same time that they were not the men to be stayed in the process of their investigation by anything which might possibly be an artifice to divert them from the scent.

The place which we have described as the scullery, was reached: the detectives passed at once into the front kitchen—but, as the reader may imagine, without discovering the object of their search. Cupboards were opened—nooks were pryed into—but all in vain. They repassed into the scullery: the huge door communicating with the cellar was opened—the interior was inspected—but no Jack Smedley was there. The two officers exchanged quick glances, as much as to imply that the woman had spoken truthfully after all, and that their trouble was vainly taken.

"Now, gentlemen," said Bab—and it was a very anxious moment for the woman—but her inward feelings were not outwardly betrayed; "you will perhaps come up to the parlour and have a nice drop of something warm?"

"In a minute, ma'am," answered the tall detective. "But what the deuce does a bit of carpet mean in a place like this?"

He looked searchingly at the goldbeater's wife as he spoke; and she steadily met that scrutinizing gaze. The next instant he kicked up the carpet with his foot: but the table stood so exactly over the outlines of the trap-door that the carpet was not dislodged sufficiently to reveal them. The keen experienced eye of the detective led to the fancy that he perceived something like a studied artifice in the arrangement of the kitchen utensils and crockery on the little deal table; and lifting it up, he removed it away from the middle of the scullery. At the same instant he glanced furtively towards the woman: it struck him that for a single moment there was the glitter of uneasiness in her eyes: but if so, that betrayal of her feeling was so transient it could not be regarded as a positive certainty. However, the bit of carpet was now kicked completely away; and the outlines of the trap-door were revealed.

"Ah, here is something, Tom!" said the tall detective, stamping with his feet above the mouth of the pit, so that the hollow sound thus produced confirmed the suspicion of the existence of a trap-door.

The next instant it was raised; and at the same moment a sudden precipitate rush, as if of some wild animal, caused the detectives themselves to start—while a shriek of terror thrilled from the lips of the woman who until this abrupt occurrence had maintained such extraordinary presence of mind. It was the black cat, which had come sweeping down the stairs with a gushing noise of lightning quickness; and making the circuit of the scullery, the animal whisked up the staircase again as if it were wild.

"That's an omen, I suppose?" said the tall de-

tective, looking significantly at the goldbeater's wife, who was pale with terror.

"It is enough to startle anybody," she observed, once more by a mighty effort recovering her self-possession. "It's the presence of you strangers that frightens the poor creature. As for the trap-door here, it only covers a well——"

"With steps to it," said the detective, with an ironical smile.

"Yes—with steps down to a certain distance: they are all broken at the bottom—and if you don't mind——"

"You think we shall be drowned? It's a very curious earthy smell for water to send up; and what's more," added the detective, holding the candle over the opening, "I can't catch the reflection of any water at all."

Bab felt convinced it was all up with the Burker; and she inwardly trembled on account of herself; for her arrest must necessarily follow, if only for the reason that she was harbouring a criminal on whose head a reward was set. She thought of escape: but how could she effect it? There was a man in the passage up-stairs; and she had been told that the back part of the premises was watched by other officers.

"Now, Tom, hold the light," said the tall detective; "and keep an eye——"

He did not finish the sentence—but nodded significantly; and his sedate, quiet-looking, but not the less resolute subordinate comprehended that the allusion bore reference to Mrs. Smedley. Drawing forth a pair of pistols, the detective began to descend the stone steps of the subterranean—while his man held the candle conveniently at the mouth: and the former said in a stern decisive tone, "Now, Mr. Smedley, we know you are here! You had better surrender yourself; for if you attempt any resistance, you will perhaps get a bullet through the head."

This intimation was followed by the click of one pistol—then by that of the other: yet no answer was returned.

"What will the Burker do?" thought Bab to herself: and quick as lightning she revolved in her mind how she could possibly second any endeavour that he might perchance make for the frustration of the officers' designs.

At that self-same instant there was another wild rush of the frenzied black cat. This time it was in the passage on the ground floor; but the sounds reached the ears of those in the scullery. The door at the head of the staircase, having doubtless been disturbed by the animal, closed with violence; and the tall detective demanded, "What the deuce is that, Tom?"

"Only that cursed animal again," was the response: for all was now suddenly still once more.

Mrs. Smedley, having her nerves by this time completely strung for any abrupt or startling occurrence, quickly regained her own self-possession; and pushing the door at the bottom of the staircase, she said, "At all events we wont have the brute come rushing down here again."

The door closed and latched itself by the impulse thus given to it; and the officer who answered to the abbreviated Christian name of Tom, exclaimed sternly, "You keep quiet, ma'am! Stand away from that door—and none of your nonsense!"

"She can't escape, Tom," observed his superior: "the passage up-stairs is guarded."

All that followed was now the work of a few instants. Scarcely had the tall detective given utterance to those last words which we have recorded, when there was a rush beneath—a blow was dealt—and he disappeared as if engulfed in the dark depth from the view of his companion who was holding the light. Quick as thought, Bab Smedley threw herself with the fury of a tiger-cat upon the subordinate Tom, and precipitated him headlong down the steps. The sounds of several severely dealt blows coming up from the abyss, reached her ears; but she could see nothing—the light had fallen into the pit—she was enveloped in total darkness. Not for an instant did she lose her presence of mind: she knew where on a shelf there were the means of obtaining another light: a lucifer was struck—and at the very moment that she applied it to another candle, Barney the Burker emerged from below.

"Are they done for?" was Mrs. Smedley's rapidly put question.

"Let's see," said the Burker: and snatching the candle from her hand, he partially descended the steps—whence almost instantaneously returning, he added, "They're stunned, if not killed. And now what's to be done next?"

Bab, in a hasty whisper, gave the wretch to understand that there was an officer in the passage, and that there were others outside, watching the back premises.

"Take the light—go up quick," said the Burker, —"tell the officer he's wanted below—whimper a bit—and say as how your poor husband is took."

The woman instantaneously proceeded to obey Barney's directions; and with the light in her hand, she ascended the stairs. We should observe that from the circumstance of the doors at top and bottom being closed, the officer in the passage had heard little or nothing of what was going on below: or if indeed that suddenly executed movement on the part of Mrs. Smedley, by which Tom was thrown into the pit, had met his ears, it might naturally have been taken for the quick transient scuffle of an arrest being effected. Leaving the doors open—for she comprehended full well what the Burker's intention was—the infamous woman assumed a look of deep distress; and accosting the officer who had been appointed to keep guard upon the front door, she said in a whimpering tone, and breaking her words with an apparently convulsing sob, "It's all over! They have taken my poor dear man—and they want you down below. This is the way; there's a light where they are. Oh, dear!—oh, dear!"

The woman's part was so well played—and the whole proceeding seemed so natural—that the officer hesitated not for an instant to descend the steps to which she led him,—she herself remaining on the top to light him as he went down. The instant he reached the bottom he was felled by a blow from the Burker's club: Bab Smedley rushed down the stairs—and her ruffian accomplice, at once perceiving that the unfortunate official was stunned, dragged him into the cellar, the huge door of which he closed and bolted. Another quick examination of the subterranean showed the miscreant that the two detectives still lay motionless at the bottom of the steps; and thus far a complete triumph was gained.

But how to escape? Mrs. Smedley and the Burker had all their wits about them. They quickly ascended to the parlour, where they each partook of a hasty glass of spirits; and the Burker said, "Now put on your things without an instant's delay."

Bab rushed up to her bed-chamber: her bonnet and shawl were slipped on: her money, the few trinkets she possessed, and a packet of papers were quickly secured about her person—so that in a couple of minutes she joined the Burker again.

"Now we must make a rush for it!" he said. "You go out first, and turn to the left: I'll follow quick and go to the right. We must get out of London as quick as we can, and trust to chances whether as how we ever meet again. But first of all, have you got any blunt?"

Bab Smedley thrust three or four sovereigns into the Burker's hand; and she then issued forth from the front door of the house. Barney kept it about an inch ajar to listen, with his club in readiness to receive any other police-officials who might possibly rush in. But all was quiet; and after allowing about a minute's pause, he quitted the habitation, —closing the door behind him. Without the slightest molestation he continued his way along the street—and felt himself to be in comparative safety.

There were in reality no more officials in the front part of the Smedleys' house: but a couple were watching in the yard at the back,—little dreaming of the utter discomfiture of their comrades within. The whole affair on the part of the detectives had been entered upon so quietly, that the neighbours in the street continued utterly unsuspicious of what was going on; and thus no hue and cry was raised when the Burker stole forth. The officers, as the reader has seen, had come hither merely for the arrest of Jack Smedley: but if they could have foreseen that instead of the gold

beater they would have found the Burker, they would have adopted far different precautions and would have invaded the house in a posse.

It might have been ten minutes after the Burker's escape, that the tall detective began to recover his senses: for he was only stunned—not killed—by the onslaught he had experienced. He was however much injured: for the miscreant had beaten him about the head and shoulders with his club. On thus coming to himself, the detective heard the subdued moans of his subordinate Tom; and it was yet several minutes before the two men were sufficiently recovered to drag themselves up from the pit. Then they heard a feeble knocking at the cellar-door: they opened it—and found their comrade who had been made a prisoner there, and who was nearly as much injured as themselves. The watchers from the back yard were admitted into the house; but it was only too evident that the Burker and Bab Smedley had escaped.

On the following day the subterranean was thoroughly investigated by the police: the earth at the bottom was dug up—and slight though sufficient traces were discovered to prove that the evidences of foul crimes had been concealed and well nigh obliterated there. The quick-lime, mixed with the soil, afforded a frightful indication of how the dark work had been done; and though no human remains were disinterred, there existed no doubt that more than one victim of murder had been consigned to that subterranean tomb.

CHAPTER XCII.

ATALANTA.

Turn we now to the lodgings of the Hon. Augustus Softly—the young officer to whom Madame Angelique, on breaking up her establishment, so generously bequeathed Mademoiselle Armantine.

Very beautiful was the French girl—yet far from being so little frail as the milliner had chosen to represent her. Of a fascinating style of loveliness—with all the first freshness of youth sufficiently well preserved—and indeed still youthful, for she was not yet twenty-two—Armantine was fully calculated to make a powerful impression on such a mind as that of Mr Softly. Her manners were captivating: she had all those little bewitching arts which specially characterize the females of the nation to which she belonged: she was far from deficient in accomplishments—she could draw, play, and sing; and as for dancing, she was a veritable proficient in the art. Thus altogether the Hon. Augustus Softly found her a very enchanting mistress.

Several days had elapsed since the commencement of his acquaintance with Armantine: and one afternoon, at about two o'clock, she arrived at his lodgings, according to an appointment made on the previous day. He purposed to regale her with a champagne luncheon; and he had risen at least an hour earlier than usual for the purpose. The apartment where he received her was decorated in true bachelor-fashion: foils and boxing-gloves, hunting whips and firearms, fishing-tackle and other accessories to field sports, were scattered about—though Mr. Softly had never angled but once in his life, on which occasion after a whole day's fishing he caught a minnow—he was an execrable shot—and as for hunting, he had not sufficient courage to follow the hounds. But he was nevertheless fond of boasting of his accomplishments and his feats in all these respects; and he considered it manly to have the articles above enumerated scattered about his apartments.

Mademoiselle Armantine, having flung off her bonnet and shawl, sate down at table; and the champagne soon led to very lively discourse.

"My dear girl," said Softly, after some conversation on general topics, "I ought to consider myself exceedingly fortunate that you should prefer me to the Duke of Marchmont."

"Ah! my dear Augustus," replied the young lady, fixing her eyes tenderly upon him; "to see you at parade was perfectly irresistible. But Madame Angelique told you all about it?"

"Yes: and I certainly felt myself highly flattered. But don't be offended, my dear Armantine," continued Mr. Softly: "I only just want to ask one little question—and that is, did you really never have a lover—you know what I mean—before the Duke?"

"Oh, never! never!" exclaimed the French girl, with so much readiness that Mr. Softly was at once convinced of her sincerity.

"And your father——"

"Ah, don't speak of him!" suddenly interrupted Armantine, with a real though transient feeling of remorse.

"Do tell me," said the young gentleman, "something about your earlier life. Drink another glass of champagne—let us laugh and be as gay as possible."

"Well, we will," said Armantine. "Now listen while I tell you a little tale——"

"Is it a true one?" asked Softly.

"You shall judge for yourself. About five years ago," continued Armantine, "a young French lady, endowed with tolerable accomplishments, and about as good looking as I am——"

"In that case she was an angel," cried the lieutenant of the Guards.

"She was an angel, then—since you will have it so," resumed Armantine, laughing so as to display her pearly teeth. "Well, this angel was consigned to a convent——"

"I recollect that Madame Angelique——"

"Now, do be silent!—pray don't interrupt me!"—and Armantine tapped his cheek with her small snowy white hand. "The young lady I speak of was consigned to a convent—which she relished about as much as you would fancy bread and water for your dinner. Well, she had not been many weeks there when she escaped; and not daring to return home, sped to Paris. She knew not exactly how to get her living; and finding it inconvenient to starve—as well as being little disposed to plunge headlong into improper courses——You see, my dear Augustus, it is a very moral tale——"

"But don't let it get *too* serious," interjected Softly.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Armantine, with another smile: "it is about to take a very lively turn. Being an accomplished dancer, the young lady went boldly to the Opera——not very boldly though—I mean that the act was bold to go there

at all: for she was all modesty and confusion. However, she inquired for the ballet-master, and besought employment. He desired her to afford him a specimen of her abilities; and I suppose that as in consequence of her timidity she acquitted herself with some degree of awkwardness, he chucked her under the chin—no doubt for the purpose of encouraging her. She boxed his ears in return. For a moment he appeared as if about to be desperately angry: but altering his mind he burst out into a hearty laugh—for he was a very good-natured man. This little incident gave the young lady spirits; and then she acquitted herself so well that he resolved to prepare her for the ballet. Then she went through a course of training: her progress was incredible—her proficiency was soon complete. The ballet-master treated her with kindness—protected her from insult—and appeared to have conceived a paternal affection for the young lady after the repulse which his first amatory overture had received. At length the day came when she was to make her appearance in public; and every wall in Paris was covered with immense posters, announcing the intended *debut* of Mademoiselle Atalanta—for that was the name which the exquisite imagination of the ballet-master bestowed upon her."

"And a very pretty name too!" observed Softly: "but of course not so captivating as Armantine. Pray proceed."

"Atalanta's triumph was immense," continued the French girl; "and the reviews on the following day spoke of her as a perfect miracle in the Terpsichorean sphere. It may perhaps be as well to observe that out of the dozen principal *critiques* the ballet-master himself wrote seven, all in different strains of eulogy; and the remaining five were penned by the reviewers immediately after the champagne-supper which the Director of the Opera gave to the gentlemen of the press in the Green-room. But all this apart, Atalanta's triumph was really immense. She appeared as a sylph amongst a mass of clouds: she had wings at her back—flowers in her hair; and whatsoever beauties of form she possessed were developed by the gauzy drapery. The enthusiasm her appearance excited, no doubt inspired her to put forth all her powers; and subsequent *critiques*—which were *not* penned by the friendly ballet-master, and *not* written under the influence of the Director's champagne—pronounced her style of dancing to be a perfect combination of all the elegancies and graces pertaining to the art."

"The ravishing creature!" ejaculated Softly. "But I fancy I see in this lovely embodiment of graces and elegancies——"

"Pray anticipate nothing!" interjected Armantine, again tapping her foolish young lover's cheek in a playful manner. "You may easily suppose that she had a great many overtures, and was exposed to many temptations—some of which, when rejected, changed into persecution. And now I come to that part which constitutes my motive for telling you this tale. Amongst the noblemen and gentlemen—foreign as well as French—who obtained admittance behind the scenes and were allowed the *entrée* of the Green-room, was a fierce military-looking Englishman, some forty years of age, who made the most brilliant overtures to Mademoiselle Atalanta: but, along with the rest, he experienced a decisive refusal. He became the most persevering of her persecutors. He had her carried off to a lonely house on the outskirts of Paris: but thence she escaped. A second time was she carried off; and on this occasion to a house of infamy, where the unprincipled Englishman vowed that if she did not submit by fair means, violence should be used, and all Paris should know next day that Atalanta, the supposed paragon of virtue, had passed the night there. She however escaped a second time; the police were informed of the outrage—and the Englishman was ordered to leave Paris. His infatuation took a phase by no means uncommon: it turned from love to hate—and he secretly set himself to work to find out who Mademoiselle Atalanta really was. He succeeded: he communicated with her family; and for the third time was she carried off when leaving the opera—but on this occasion by her father and brother. She was taken back to her convent. This was what the Englishman desired; and he found means of causing a letter to be conveyed to her, intimating that if she would consent to fly with him, he would effect her escape. She showed the letter to the Superior: it was conveyed to the police—and the Englishman was turned out of France. Circumstances recently brought Atalanta to London. This very day she has encountered the Englishman; and he has threatened her with his implacable vengeance unless she chooses to place herself under his protection."

"And the charming Atalanta," exclaimed Softly, "is, as I all along suspected, the equally charming Armantine?"

"Put all the *charmings* out of the question," responded the young lady, with a smile, "and you are right. Now, my dear Augustus, you are acquainted with one episode in my life."

"Yes—and Madame Angelique told me that your father is a Marquis," he immediately added.

"Ah! pray do not speak of him," murmured Armantine. "If I were married, it would indeed be very, very different!"

"And Madame Angelique," pursued Softly, "helped the Duke of Marchmont to carry you off from the convent two or three months back."

"If you see Marchmont," was the wily French girl's guarded response, "he will tell you all about it."

"I saw him just now," rejoined Softly.

"Ah, indeed!" ejaculated Armantine quickly.

"Yes—he called upon me for a few minutes," rejoined the Hon. Augustus Softly, "about half-an-hour before you came in. To tell you the truth—being rather proud of my conquest, I spoke of it to the Duke; and he said enough to confirm Madame Angelique's tale. But about this Englishman of your's——what is his name?"

"His name?—Captain Cartwright," responded Armantine: and then she added with a visible shudder, "And, Oh! he is so terribly ferocious—such a desperate man! I am sure I should faint if he made his appearance to molest me!"

"Molest you, my dear girl?" exclaimed Mr. Softly, assuming a very valorous look: "not while I am here to defend you! No matter whether swords or pistols—egad! I would teach him a lesson which he should not forget!"

Armantine watched her lover narrowly, but

without seeming to do so, as he thus spoke; and she was shrewd and penetrating enough to discover that beneath his parade of magnanimity there was a real cowardice. In truth the Hon. Augustus Softly was as chicken-hearted a young gentleman as ever by such paltriness of disposition disgraced the British uniform. Let the reader recollect that we are by no means drawing him as a type of British officers generally—nor of those of the Guards especially. In his foppery, his conceit, his extravagance, and his dissipated habits, he might certainly be taken as the representative of a large class of military men bearing commissions: but in the cowardice of his nature he constituted an exception.

"Come," said Armantine, suddenly assuming a most lively air, "we will not talk any more about this odious captain. The champagne ought to put us in good spirits. Come, sing me a song!"

"I never sang in my life, my dear girl," replied Softly. "The Guards, you know, don't sing."

"Well, but we must do something to amuse ourselves," exclaimed Armantine, now exhibiting all the gaiety and sprightliness that characterize the women of the country to which she belonged. "Ah! there is your uniform! I have a very great mind to try it on and see how it fits me."

"Do!" exclaimed Softly. "Capital idea!—delicious, 'pon my honour!"

Armantine sprang from her seat, laughing merrily; and first of all she put on the Hon. Augustus Softly's cap with the gold band round it. She looked at herself in the glass; and as the cap rested above the long flowing glossy hair, and the countenance wore an expression of mischievous archness, Mademoiselle Armantine looked quite charming. Softly was enraptured: he considered the whole proceeding exquisite; and any one might indeed have envied him the facility with which he was amused.

"Now for the coat!" exclaimed Armantine: and she was about to put it on.

"What! over your dress?" said Augustus.

"You wicked fellow, what would you have me do?" and she tapped him playfully on the cheek. "Surely it will fit me as it is? You are not so very stout—neither am I."

Thus speaking, and laughing merrily all the while, Armantine put on the red coat: but she could not fasten it across her bosom. Mr. Softly volunteered his aid; and as he availed himself of the opportunity to snatch divers little licences with his beautiful mistress, the playful tapping of the cheek was renewed, accompanied by peals of laughter more hilarious than ever. But all of a sudden Armantine's countenance underwent a striking change; a faint shriek burst from her lips; and on the Hon. Augustus Softly turning hastily round in the direction to which her eyes were looking, he started on beholding the cause of her affright.

A very fierce-looking gentleman was standing upon the threshold, holding the door half-open, and surveying the scene. He was tall, and somewhat stoutly built,—his form being indicative of great strength; while the expression of his countenance denoted a veritable fire-eater. He was of the middle age—perhaps a trifle past it; and had grey whiskers and moustaches,—the latter considerably enhancing the fierceness of his look. His brows, naturally thick and overhanging, were now much corrugated, as if with the infuriate feelings which were pent up in his soul, but seeking to have a vent, and determined to find one too. He wore a sort of semi-military apparel, of a somewhat antiquated and well-nigh exploded fashion. A surtout coat, all frogged and braided over the breast, and fastening with hooks and eyes, fitted tight to his strongly built person, and was closed up to the throat. He had grey trousers, with red stripes; and on his head was a species of foraging-cap. He wore buckskin gloves; and had altogether the air of a military man of the old school.

Mr. Softly's fears at once suggested that Armantine's terror could have been created by nothing but the appearance of Captain Cartwright—and that therefore the formidable Captain Cartwright this fierce-looking individual must assuredly be.

"Save me from him, my dear Augustus!" said Armantine, flinging her arms about the neck of her lover, and clinging to him as if in the very frenzy of terror.

"Oh—yes—yes! I'll—I'll save you, my dear," stammered the young Guardsman, with a very pale countenance. "But perhaps the gentleman—the Captain, I mean—for I suppose it *is* Captain Cartwright to whom I have the honour of speaking—will be so good as to explain——"

"Explain, sir?" ejaculated the fierce-looking individual, now seeming ten thousand times more fierce than at first: "I never explain!—unless it is with such things as these:" and he pointed towards a sword and a pistol-case which lay upon a side table.

"Perhaps, sir," said Mr. Softly, plucking up all the courage he could possibly call to his aid in order to meet the present crisis, "if you were to do me the honour to—to sit down—and—and take a glass of wine——"

"My demeanour here, sir," interrupted the Captain, closing the door violently behind him, "depends entirely on the answers I receive to a few questions I am going to put. In that young lady, sir, I entertain a very deep interest——"

"Don't for heaven's sake, irritate him, my dearest Augustus!" whispered Armantine, as with countenance averted from Captain Cartwright she tremblingly clung to her lover's arm.

"A very deep interest," continued the fierce-looking intruder; "and moreover I have her father's authority for taking any step that may seem good to me according to circumstances."

"Ah, my poor father!" murmured Armantine. "But pray, my dear Augustus, do not—do not anger this dreadful man—or he will kill us both outright!"

"I may at one time have entertained a tender sentiment for that young lady," continued Captain Cartwright; "but circumstances have occurred to alter that feeling—and now it is a fraternal or paternal regard that I experience for her. I have traced her hither. If you tell me, Mr. Softly, that she is your wife, I shall be satisfied—I shall rejoice—I shall fill a bumper of champagne——and what is more, I shall drink it!"

Here, as if to render his words all the more impressive, Captain Cartwright struck the table such

a violent blow with his clenched fist that Mr. Softly shuddered to the innermost confines of his being; while his mistress whispered in a hastier and more tremulous tone than ever, "He is mad! he is desperate! For heaven's sake say anything—everything to pacify him! I know all your courage, my dear Augustus: but think what a dreadful thing it would be for me if he stretched you weltering in your blood at my feet!"

At this horrible idea poor Softly gave vent to a low moan; and he trembled so perceptibly that the reader may marvel how it was that Armantine could whisperingly add, "For both our sakes restrain this dreadful ardour of your's!—curb your fiery temper!—tell him everything—promise him everything—or he will massacre us!"

Meanwhile Captain Cartwright, having dealt that terribly energetic thump upon the table, took three or four strides to and fro in the apartment as if to compose his excited feeling: but if this were his object, the aim was not reached—for it was with the fiercest possible expression of countenance that he once more accosted the miserable Augustus Softly.

"Yes, sir," continued the fire-eater, "if that young lady is your wife, I shall be happy—I shall rejoice: I shall be enabled to speed to her father with the agreeable intelligence. But if, sir, on the other hand"—and here Captain Cartwright ground his teeth as if with an uncontrollable fury at the bare idea he was about to explain,—"if, sir, you cannot look me frankly in the face and say that she is here without discredit or dishonour to herself, I shall be compelled, sir—painful though the alternative be—to embrue my hands in the blood of a fellow-creature!"

Having given vent to this frightful threat, Captain Cartwright did not dash his clenched fist upon the table—but he stalked straight up to where the young officer's sword lay, and he deliberately drew the weapon from its sheath.

"Just heaven, he will murder us!" whispered Armantine, as if in a dying voice. "For my sake—for both our sakes—tell him I am your wife!"

"But, my dear girl——"

"Did you speak, sir?" demanded the officer, turning round upon Softly with such fierce abruptness that the unfortunate young gentleman felt his blood all curdling in his veins, his teeth chattering, and his limbs trembling. "Did you speak, sir, I ask?—did you give me an answer to my question? Yes or no—is that lady your wife?"

"Ye-e-e-s," replied Augustus, in such a terrible state of bewilderment that he scarcely knew what he was saying.

"Yes?" exclaimed Cartwright. "Speak it out more plainly!"

"For heaven's sake," whispered Armantine, "dearest Augustus——"

"Yes, she is my wife!" said the young officer, feeling as if by the assertion his life was suddenly saved.

"Then look up, Armantine — and be not abashed!" exclaimed Cartwright. "Never mind this masquerading nonsense—dressing yourself up in your husband's regimentals! New-married people are as silly as lovers after all! Mr. Softly, you are a man of honour—I am proud, sir, to make your acquaintance. There is my hand."

While thus speaking, the terrible captain had returned the sword to its sheath; and hastily drawing off his buckskin glove, he presented his hand to Softly. The young gentleman took it; and now Mademoiselle Armantine ventured to look round upon the fierce Captain.

"Do not be afraid of me any longer," he said, assuming a milder tone and look. "Here's my hand for *you* also—and now I can communicate joyous tidings to your father. But, Ah! I forget something! The marriage certificate? I must see it—I must satisfy myself before I compromise my word in communicating with your father."

"Tell him you have left it elsewhere," hastily whispered Armantine. "Tell him anything—for heaven's sake do! His look is already changing."

"The marriage certificate, sir?" said Captain Cartwright sternly.

"The certificate? Oh ye-e-e-s," stammered the Hon. Augustus Softly. "It's all right—it's—it's at a friend's of mine—where we had the wedding-breakfast——ye-e-e-s, that's it."

"Good!" exclaimed Captain Cartwright: "you are a man of honour in every respect—and it rejoices me that I can be proud of your friendship instead of having to wreak a frightful vengeance upon you. Here's to both your healths!"

Thus speaking, the now appeased fire-eater filled himself a glass of champagne, and poured the contents down that throat from which such terrible menaces had recently come forth.

"Mr. Softly," he continued, "I must see this certificate. I can say nothing to Armantine's father until I have received indisputable evidence that she *is* your wife. To-morrow I am engaged to fight a duel in the morning—to trounce a rascal in the afternoon—and to break a fellow's head at my Club in the evening. But the day after, sir, at two o'clock punctually, I shall be here. I don't like using threats, sir,"—and here the Captain looked most overpoweringly fierce: "but if the certificate is not forthcoming, I shall be compelled, sir—disagreeably compelled—to inflict such a chastisement on you——"

"Oh, Captain Cartwright!" exclaimed Armantine, as if in an agony of terror: "spare these dreadful threats!—the certificate will be forthcoming! Will it not, dear Augustus?"—and she looked appealingly at her paramour.

"Ye-e-e-s—Oh! yes," responded the miserable Softly, who again felt that all the blood was curdling in his veins and that his hair was standing on end.

"Good!" exclaimed the Captain. "The day after to-morrow at two o'clock I shall be here!"

He then stalked out of the room, closing the door violently behind him; and the miserable Mr. Augustus Softly sank with a hollow groan into an arm-chair. He looked the very picture of wretchedness: but Armantine filled him a glass of wine—seated herself on his knee—wound her arm about his neck—and plied all her most witching cajoleries—lavished too all the most tender caresses, with such effect that the young gentleman rallied sufficiently to envisage his position and discuss it within himself.

What was to be done? To appeal to a magistrate for protection against the fire-eater, would be virtually to avow a dastard inability to protect himself. To run away from London at a moment

when he knew he could not procure leave of absence from his regiment, would be to renounce his commission—and when the reason should be known, to be cut by everybody as a coward. Yet the certificate *must* be forthcoming! Would the date of it matter so long as it was displayed? Certainly not. Then the only alternative which could be adopted, was the marriage of the Hon. Augustus Softly with Mademoiselle Armantine by special licence on the morrow.

All these reflections passed through Mr. Softly's brain, as Armantine doffed the red coat and the cap. He looked at her. She was exquisitely shaped—her countenance was beautiful. But then, to marry one's mistress! Still it was better than to be sacrificed to the vengeance of a blood-thirsty fire-eater; and Mr. Softly came to the conclusion that it was the best course he could possibly adopt. Armantine fully comprehended all that was passing in his mind: she lavished her caresses upon him—she declared how much she loved him—she said everything to gratify his vanity and minister to his pride—she protested that she was ready and willing to make any sacrifice to ensure his happiness—she would even flee from the country, though her own heart should break—but she dreaded the vengeance of the terrible Cartwright on account of her dear Augustus!

Could Mr. Softly resist all this? Impossible! He drank glass after glass of champagne—his blood was heated with the wine and with Armantine's seductive caresses—he likewise experienced an awful horror of Captain Cartwright; and thus, amidst the strange and unnatural confusion of his feelings and bewilderment of his thoughts, he decided on securing the charmer as his wife, and thereby averting the hideous vengeance of the fire-eater.

CHAPTER XCIII.

THE OLD LORD AND HIS MISTRESS.

THE scene now changes to the sumptuously furnished house which Lord Wenham had hired for the accommodation of his beautiful Eglantine—who was passed off on him as the immaculate niece of the not very immaculate Madame Angelique. The reader will not have forgotten that his lordship was an octogenarian, with bowed form, wrinkled face, an absence of teeth, a continuous hacking cough, and a mumbling stammering mode of speech. Well nigh in his dotage, he had placed implicit confidence in the specious tale of Eglantine's virtue, and in the specious manner in which the young lady had played her part towards her "wicked aunt." Immensely rich, and a widower, the antiquated nobleman thought that he had a perfect right to minister to his own pleasures; and he had not therefore hesitated to form this most expensive connexion.

It was in the forenoon on the day following the incidents which we have related in the preceding chapter; and if we peep into an exquisitely furnished boudoir at Miss Eglantine's new abode, we shall find the young lady and her ancient protector seated at breakfast. His lordship had passed the night at the house; and he was completely infatuated, like an old dotard as he was, with his beautiful mistress. We should observe that there had been all the shyness and prudery of a veritable virgin bride in the first instance; and now that some days had elapsed since the connexion began, Eglantine appeared to entertain so lively a sense of the old lord's generosity and kindness, that she behaved as if she already esteemed and could soon love him.

They were seated, as we have said, at breakfast,—Eglantine in a charming *deshabillée* — Lord Wenham in a dressing-gown and black velvet skull-cap. The contrast was immense—and afforded a striking illustration of the varieties of appearance which human beings may present to the view,—how one may be formed to fascinate and another to disgust—how grace, elegance, and loveliness may belong to youth, and how loathsome ugliness may characterize old age. And yet that old lord was infatuated enough to hug the belief that he had already rendered himself agreeable to Eglantine—that she esteemed him—and that she would soon love him. And he moreover already doted upon her: he would sooner have parted with title and wealth than have separated from her. He was jealous too—as jealous as he could be ——not because she had given him any reason for the sentiment, nor because he was deficient in conceit of his own merits—but because it is in the nature of all men to be thus jealous of young wives, and still more of young mistresses.

"My dear girl," he presently said, after having contemplated her for two or three minutes,—"ugh! ugh! this dreadful cough of mine!——you seem pensive to-day? Tell me, my sweet girl—ugh! ugh! if it weren't for this horrible cough I should feel quite young again!—But tell me, what it is that makes you look so pensive?"

"Pensive—am I pensive?" ejaculated Eglantine, as if suddenly starting up from a reverie: "I am sure I did not think I was! And yet——"

"Ugh! ugh!—and yet——ugh! ugh!—this dreadful cough! But why, my dear, did you qualify your assurance? Pray be candid with me—ugh! ugh! If there is anything you want——ugh! ugh!——anything more I can do to ensure your happiness——"

"Your lordship has already done so much for me," responded Eglantine, "as to leave not a single wish unfulfiled. Indeed, I had never formed any such wishes at all—for I did not foresee what my fate was to be!"—and as Eglantine thus spoke in a tremulous voice, she suffered her eyelids to droop—her air became pensive again—and then she hastily passed her kerchief across her brow, as if wiping away tears.

"Come, come, my dear girl," said the old nobleman, "what—what—ugh! ugh!—perdition take this cough of mine!—ugh! ugh!—what, what is it that makes you so melancholy?"

"To be candid with you, my lord," answered Eglantine, suddenly looking up with an air of the most artless sincerity into the countenance of her aged protector, "I have been thinking what my uncle would say to me if he knew what I had done—or what he would do to my aunt if he learnt to what she has brought me?"

"Your uncle—ugh! Your aunt—ugh! ugh!" stammered and coughed Lord Wenham. "I never

knew that there was a *Monsieur* Angelique—I always thought that Madame was either a widow—or at least passed as such. Tell me, my dear—ugh! ugh! ugh!—this cough will be the death of me—ugh! ugh!"

"Madame Angelique is a widow," explained Eglantine: "but nevertheless I have an uncle. I will tell you how it is. Madame Angelique's sister married an English gentleman: I am the issue of that union. My parents are dead, as your lordship has already been told; and I was taken at their death into the care of a distant relative. She also died; and then my aunt Angelique took care of me. My late father's brother has for a long time been abroad—first in the army—then holding a high situation in the civil service of India; and he is shortly to return home—even if he be not at this moment in England. That is the uncle, my dear lord," added Eglantine, with a profound sigh, "whom I dread so much."

"Is he a very stern man—ugh! ugh!—is he so very formidable?" asked Lord Wenham: and then he was seized with such a violent fit of coughing that it was a wonder he was not shaken into the next world.

"I have not seen him since I was about ten or eleven years old," replied Eglantine, when the fit of coughing was over; "and then my uncle came on a year's leave to England for the benefit of his health. Oh! I never can forget that countenance of his—so stern—so threatening—so fierce! Do not, my dear lord, judge all the other members of my family by my aunt Angelique—nor by what I myself have become."

"Nonsense, nonsense, my dear!" ejaculated Wenham: "don't talk in this way of yourself. You seem to think—ugh! ugh!—that you have done something most dreadfully bad by living with me. Nothing of the sort—ugh! ugh! ugh! this cough—ugh! ugh!—of mine! It is not as if you had been a wild giddy girl, with a number of lovers—or as if you had been one of the regular inmates of Madame Angelique's establishment. But innocent—ugh! ugh!—and virtuous—ugh! ugh!—as you were——"

"Ah! still, my lord," said Eglantine, with another profound sigh, "I have fallen—I feel it—and how can I look my uncle in the face, should he find me out on his return to England?"

"But why need he find you out?" inquired the old nobleman: "why—ugh! ugh!—should he discover—ugh! ugh!—where you are?"

"How can it possibly be avoided?" asked Eglantine. "He will come to London—he is unmarried—childless—and I believe well off. He will ask for his young relative—he will not submit to the evasions and equivocations which my aunt Angelique is sure to use. He is terribly violent—resolutely determined—fierce almost to savageness. He is persevering too; and if he do not extort from Madame Angelique a confession of all that has occurred, he will leave no stone unturned in order to find me out."

"Ugh! ugh!—my dear—then we must hide you," said the old nobleman: and as his voice abruptly rose from its wonted mumbling and stammering into a positive shriek, he yelled forth, "I couldn't part from you!—they shan't tear you from me! they shan't tear you from me!"

"Oh, how kind and good your lordship is!" murmured Eglantine, apparently melted to tears: and starting from her seat, she threw her arms round the old dotard's neck, lavishing caresses upon him.

"You do love me a *leetle* bit?" said Wenham, looking up into her face with gloating eyes, and grinning like an ancient goat.

"Ah! until now I esteemed you," responded Eglantine: "but at present I feel—yes, I feel that I love you!"—then gliding back to her seat, she flung upon her old protector a look that seemed to vibrate with mingled tenderness and gratitude.

"You are a good girl—ugh! ugh!—a very good girl," said the nobleman; "and we will go out presently in the carriage to the splendid shawl-shop in Regent-street—where—ugh! ugh!—you shall choose whatever you like."

"Ah, my dear lord," exclaimed Eglantine, "now you will understand the impossibility of keeping myself concealed from this terrible uncle of mine, whenever he begins to search for me. How can I remain in-doors all day? how can I debar myself the pleasure of accompanying you in your drives? I care not for society or gaiety: with you I can be happy:—but complete loneliness and seclusion I can not endure! My uncle must sooner or later find me out——"

At this moment the door opened; and a shriek pealed from Eglantine's lips. Lord Wenham at first looked aghast: but on perceiving in which direction the eyes of his young mistress were bent, he turned himself round in his chair, and beheld a formidable-looking personage advancing into the room. We may save ourselves the trouble of much description, by declaring at once that the intruder was none other than Captain Cartwright: but on the present occasion he was dressed in plain clothes. Scarcely less fierce however was his aspect than on the preceding day when he presented himself to the Hon. Augustus Softly and Mademoiselle Armantine. His countenance was stern and implacable; and on advancing into the room, he banged the door with such terrific violence that it made the old lord shudder and quake from head to foot with a startled sensation that was immediately followed by a fit of coughing which lasted for several minutes.

Meanwhile Eglantine had covered her face with her hands: and Captain Cartwright, with arms folded across his chest, stood surveying her with the sternest severity.

"And is it thus," he said, "that I find my niece—the pensioned mistress of a nobleman! I came to England for the purpose of giving you a happy home, and making you the heiress of my wealth: I had buoyed myself up with a thousand fond hopes,—hopes of happiness in my declining years, in the society of a niece who would be unto me as a daughter, and for whom I should find an eligible husband. But all these hopes are destroyed—and my deceased brother's daughter has dishonoured the name of Cartwright—that name which never was dishonoured before!"

"Spare me, dear uncle—spare me!" exclaimed Eglantine, flinging herself with every appearance of the wildest grief at Captain Cartwright's feet. "His lordship is very kind to me——"

"Kind to you, Eglantine?" ejaculated the Captain scornfully: "what means such kindness as this?"

"Sir," interrupted the old nobleman, "I—I—ugh! ugh!—would have you know that I—I—ugh! ugh!—am incapable of treating your niece otherwise than—ugh! ugh!—with kindness."

"It is something in your favour, my lord," answered Captain Cartwright sternly; "but still it will not save you from the chastisement I am bound to inflict upon the seducer of my niece."

"Oh, no do not touch him! do not injure a hair of his head!" exclaimed Eglantine, starting to her feet and bounding towards the old nobleman, around whose neck her arms were thrown.

"You are a good girl, my dear—ugh! ugh!—you are a good girl," mumbled Wenham. "There! there! don't weep—don't take on so!—sit down, my love—ugh! ugh!—and your uncle will presently grow calmer."

Eglantine retired to her chair: but Captain Cartwright remained standing, his arms still folded—his looks still sternly severe.

"Lord Wenham," he said, "listen to the few words which I have to address unto you. A beloved brother on his death-bed bequeathed his child to my care. I undertook the charge, vowing to fulfil it affectionately and honourably. My avocations recalled me to India; and I left my niece in the care of an elderly female relative in whom I could confide. She paid the debt of nature some little while back; and then Eglantine, after an interval passed with a friend, went under the protection of my sister-in-law Madame Angelique. And such protection it has been!—good heavens, such protection! In a word, my hopes are blighted—and that niece whom to her father on his death-bed I swore to protect and befriend, is a fallen creature——and *you*, my lord, are her seducer!"

"But she loves me—ugh! ugh!" shrieked forth Wenham, in that same shrill tone to which his voice had ere now risen; "and you shan't part us! —ugh! ugh!——you shan't part us!"

"Oh, uncle! uncle!" murmured the weeping Eglantine, "pray be not so cruel unto me—Oh! be not cruel unto me!"

"Cruel, niece?" ejaculated Captain Cartwright: "it is you that have been cruel to the memory of your parents—to me—aye, and unto yourself! But I must tear you hence—from this house of infamy!—you must go with me—and on *you*, my lord, will I inflict such vengeance as the seducer deserves. Not even your years—much less your rank and wealth shall protect you! You are bound to give me satisfaction for the seduction of my niece. A friend of mine will wait upon you presently; and if you refuse, I swear that I will horsewhip you publicly——not a horsewhipping for mere show—not a simple laying of the whip upon your shoulder!—but such a chastisement as shall bring you within a hair's-breadth of the grave!"

A shriek thrilled from Eglantine's lips: again she flung herself at the Captain's feet—again she implored his mercy. But fiercely seizing her by the wrist, he compelled her to rise; and then, as he tossed her from him, she sank back sobbing convulsively into her chair. Meanwhile the old nobleman had been thrown into such a nervous state of excitement by the dread of losing his beautiful mistress, and by the terrific threats of personal chastisement which the fierce Captain had flung out, that he was almost suffocated and strangled by another fit of coughing.

"If on my return to England," resumed Captain Cartwright, now addressing Eglantine with mournfulness rather than bitterness perceptible in his tone, "I had found you the honoured wedded wife of this nobleman, or of any other man of station or character, joy would have filled my heart. I should have blessed you—I should have thought with a holy comfort of the manner in which I had fulfilled my vow to your deceased parents: I should not have felt as if I myself were a guilty and perjured being in contemplating the memory of your father. But instead of hailing you as a wife, I find you living in gilded infamy——Oh, it is terrible to think of! and there is no vengeance, my lord, too deadly to be wreaked on you as this orphan girl's seducer!"

"But—but," said the nobleman, quivering with nervousness, and shaken by his hacking cough,—"but—but—ugh! ugh!—is there no means by which this matter can be settled? I—I will place a very large—ugh! ugh!—sum of money in Eglantine's name ——"

"My lord," interrupted Captain Cartwright sternly, "this is adding insult to injury! What?—think you that the loss of her honour is to be compensated for by gold? Come, Eglantine—come directly—I insist upon it!"

"She shan't go!" screeched forth the old nobleman, who looked as if he were goaded almost to frenzy: "she shan't go!"

"We shall see, my lord," answered Cartwright coldly. "Eglantine is under age—I am her natural protector and her guardian: if she refuse to accompany me of her own free will, I must put force into requisition. Come, girl, I say—come!"

"But my dear sir—ugh! ugh!—I love her!" exclaimed Lord Wenham. "She is the only good girl I ever knew!—the only one that—ugh! ugh!—did not give herself airs: and therefore—ugh! ugh!"

"But think you, my lord," demanded the Captain, "that because you love her, I will leave her here as your pensioned mistress? Heaven forbid! Come, girl—come!"

"Well, well," muttered Lord Wenham, "I suppose it must be—ugh! ugh!—it must be! Captain Cartwright—ugh! ugh!——But what will the world think? Hang the world!—ugh! ugh! I should not be the first nobleman that—ugh! ugh! ——Besides, how many have married actresses? And then too, no one need know—ugh! ugh!—that Eglantine lived with me first of all. It has only been a matter of a few days. Captain Cartwright, ahem!—ugh! ugh!—I think—ahem!—ugh!—hah!—ahem!—ugh! ugh!"

Thus, what with sometimes muttering to himself—sometimes speaking loud enough to be heard—and coughing incessantly from first to last—the old dotard conveyed an idea of what was passing in his mind.

"You think *what*, my lord?" demanded Cartwright, as Wenham suddenly stopped short.

"I think, Captain—ugh! ugh!" answered the nobleman, "that this little matter—ahem!—hah!—little matter may be perhaps arranged—ugh! ugh!—to the satisfaction of us all. Eglantine is a good girl—and—and—ugh! ugh!—will I am sure make a—ahem!—hah!—make a—you know—ugh!—a very good wife."

A wild cry of joy thrilled from Eglantine's lips as she flew towards the old nobleman; and again flinging her arms about his neck, she lavished upon him the tenderest and most endearing caresses.

"My lord," said Captain Cartwright, "you are now performing the part of an honourable man. I esteem and respect you——and I feel convinced that my beloved niece *will* make you a most excellent wife. You will have the goodness to give me your solemn written undertaking that the marriage shall be solemnized by special license to-morrow—though under circumstances of as much privacy as possible, so that it may not be known to the world that Eglantine lived under your protection as a mistress before she became a wife. Give me this undertaking, my lord—and I will depart for the present—I will not separate you—I will leave you to the discussion of such preliminaries as may be necessary for all that is to take place."

The old dotard—labouring under a mortal terror of the fierce Captain Cartwright, and equally influenced, though in another sense, by the tender caresses which Eglantine was lavishing upon him—hesitated not to give the written undertaking which the fire-eater demanded.

CHAPTER XCIV.

THE INDIAN COMMISSIONERS.

THE scene once more changes to Shrubbery Villa—the residence of the Princess Indora in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill and Bayswater. The Princess was seated alone in that exquisitely furnished apartment where we found her on the first occasion that she was introduced to our readers. It was at the back of the drawing-room on the first-floor; and the style of its appoint-

ments was altogether oriental. The lamp suspended to the ceiling, shed its soft roseate light through the transparent medium of a pink-tinted globe of glass; and the ottomans, with their red velvet cushions—the crimson draperies, with their massive gold fringes—and the carpet of corresponding dyes, appeared to borrow deeper and richer hues from that flood of lustre.

The Princess Indora was seated upon one of the ottomans; and she was arrayed in the most becoming oriental garb. A caftan of purple velvet, exquisitely embroidered, and brilliant with gems, set off the fine symmetry of her shape to admirable advantage. Confined at the throat and at the waist, the interval that was left open revealed the rounded contours of the gorgeous bust through the gauzy and almost transparent *chemisette*. She wore satin trousers of an azure colour, embroidered, and trimmed with the richest lace. Made full in the eastern style, they ballooned down to the ankles, where they were tied: the ankles themselves were bare—and the feet were thrust into morocco slippers of a purple colour ornamented with pearls. According to her custom, the Princess wore no corset: nor indeed were any artificial means of support or compression requisite for a form so superbly modelled, and the rich contours of which sustained themselves as nature intended and as if they were the sculptured delineations of a statue.

Be it recollected that the complexion of the Princess Indora was not of gipsy swarthiness, although it was of eastern duskiness; and it differed from that of the brunette of our western clime, inasmuch as it was of a clear pale brown. We have said too—but we may repeat it here—that the skin had all that fine-grained appearance and that animated polish which seemed to indicate that so far from the first freshness of youth being lost, it still adhered, unmarred and unimpaired, to a matured and voluptuous womanhood. The rich warm blood of her eastern origin mantled with carnation tint upon the cheeks—gradually softening away until imperceptibly blending with the pale brown purity of the general complexion. To gaze upon the Princess Indora—to observe those masses of luxuriantly flowing hair, dark as night, without wave or curl except at the extremities, but all as soft as silk—that faultless profile, with the straight nose, the short upper lip, and the delicately rounded chin—those coal-black eyes, full of a languishing lustre, and curtained at times by the richest ebon fringes that ever constituted a veil which woman could at pleasure draw over her thoughts—to pass on from that countenance of magnificent beauty, and suffer the eye to wander along the line of the throat, till it joined the neck where the bust expanded into such grandly rounded and voluptuously swelling contours—to travel still onward with the gaze, and follow the sweeping outlines of the arms, bare to the shoulders, and modelled with robustness and yet to the most admirable symmetry—to pursue the contemplation to the feet, which were long and shapely, with high insteps—to complete this survey of the living, glowing, animated picture, would be to feast the eyes with one of the most charming and magnificent creations that ever belonged to the sphere of the female sex.

Such indeed was the Princess Indora, who had now nearly completed her thirty-first year. Ordinarily with eastern women, they are at that age on the wane—their beauty is fading—and in appearance they resemble females of five or six years older in our western climes. But it was not so with Indora. If, in speaking of her age, she had chosen to diminish it by half-a-dozen years, no one would have questioned the truth of the assertion. In every sense was the lustre of her beauty undimmed; while the lapse of time appeared only to add to its gorgeousness and its grandeur. There was a dewy freshness on the rich red lips—the teeth which they disclosed were whiter than ivory, even as if arranged by the nicest mechanical art, and in faultless preservation. Her breath was sweet and balmy as that of a youthful maiden's; and in a word, her appearance was altogether as if she had taken the most studious care to protect her wondrous beauty against all those effects of time and circumstances which could mar its freshness or dim its brightness.

It was at about eight o'clock in the evening that we thus find the Princess Indora seated in her exquisitely furnished apartment—and evidently awaiting some expected arrival. Hopeful happiness was depicted upon her countenance: its light was dancing in the depths of her coal-black eyes; and the flutter of her heart was indicated by the quick swelling and sinking of her bosom. What was passing in the mind of the Princess Indora that she was thus hopeful and happy, and yet to a certain extent agitated with suspense? Was it that she thought of her love—that long, faithful, impassioned, and trustful love of her's—and that she had reason to believe it would shortly be crowned with bliss?

Presently the door opened; and Sagoonah made her appearance. A rapid searching glance did the ayah fling upon her mistress as she crossed the threshold—for one single moment too did the vindictive expression of a tigress pass over the features of the Hindoo woman—and then as her eyes instantaneously sank again, she stood before the Princess with her wonted respectful deference of manner.

"What is it, Sagoonah?" inquired Indora hastily. "Is it——"

She stopped short; and the colour heightened upon her cheeks—while the other evidences of her suspense were enhanced.

"Two Commissioners from Inderabad have arrived in London, my lady," answered Sagoonah; "and they crave an immediate audience."

"Two Commissioners?" ejaculated Indora, the colour suddenly vanishing from her cheeks. "What can this mean? Has anything happened to my dear father? It was but the other day that his messengers were here!——But speak, Sagoonah!—what say they?"—and the Princess was painfully excited.

"They said nothing, my lady," answered the ayah, "beyond inquiring in respect to your ladyship's health and in soliciting an immediate audience. But they are in mourning, my lady——"

"In mourning?" echoed Indora, with a half-shriek. "Oh, then I must anticipate the worst! But let them enter—introduce them quick!"

Sagoonah hastened to obey the mandate: and in a few moments the two commissioners from Inder-

Abad were ushered into the presence of the Princess. One was a venerable old man, in whom Indora at once recognised a faithful and long-attached Minister in her father's service: the other was a personage of middle age and wore a military uniform. Him also Indora knew full well: he was one of her father's equerries. Both were men of distinction and of high rank; and, as Sagoonah had intimated, they wore the purple emblems of mourning which were customary when death had to be deplored in the kingdom of Inderabad.

The two Commissioners prostrated themselves at the feet of Indora: their hearts were evidently full of emotion: and the Princess was seized with a mingled consternation and dismay which forbade her from putting the question that had risen up to her lips. At length the elder Commissioner murmured forth in a tremulous voice, "Gracious Queen, accept the allegiance which we offer for ourselves and on the part of all your Majesty's faithful subjects."

"Ah! then my beloved father is no more!" said Indora, in a deep voice: and covering her countenance with her hands, she burst into tears.

The Commissioners rose from their suppliant posture, and stood in attitudes of respect in the presence of her whom they had just hailed as their Queen. Indora appeared to forget their presence: —at that instant one idea was uppermost in her mind—that her father was no more, and that he had died while she was far away in a foreign land. Bitterly, bitterly did the lady weep. Oh, if she could only have been there to close her father's eyes and to receive his last injunctions! Oh, if the wings of a bird could have been given to her at the time, that she might have soared over seas and over lands to minister in the last hours of that beloved father—she would not have to reproach herself now! But she was stricken with remorse; for she felt as if she had been guilty of a crime in being absent from that sire in his supreme moments. At length she recollected that the Commissioners were present: she raised her looks—she wiped her eyes; but in a voice that was deep as if clouded with inward weeping, she said, "Tell me, my friends, how spoke my poor father of his daughter in his last illness?"

"His Majesty," replied the senior Commissioner, "commanded us to bear unto our future Queen the assurances of that paternal love which had never diminished—of that father's fondness which endured until the end."

"My poor father!" murmured Indora, again weeping. "But what else said he?" she inquired, after a few minutes' pause, and again drying her eyes.

"His Majesty commanded us," responded the chief Commissioner, "to assure our future Queen that he left her a Kingdom in the highest state of prosperity—a well-filled treasury, and a population that has not to complain of oppressive taxes—a large and well-disciplined army that has cheerfully sworn allegiance to your Majesty as its Queen—thriving towns, the wealth and civilization of which are not to be outvied by even the cities of the English in other parts of India. In a word, your Majesty is now, by the will of heaven, called upon to rule over a great and a happy nation, in whose heart your image is enshrined, and who will welcome with enthusiastic acclaims their Lady-Sovereign home."

Indora was profoundly affected, not only on account of her father's death, but likewise by the language which the Commissioner thus addressed to her. She wept for the memory of her perished sire—she wept likewise to know herself a Queen. She wept for the lost one—and she wept because a diadem had descended upon her brows. And there —in that villa, which, sumptuous though it were, was a mere humble cottage in comparison with the gorgeous palaces of Inderabad,—there sate this lady, the Queen of one of the mightiest independent nations of the East!

The Chief Commissioner proceeded to give her Majesty certain details relative to her father's death, and also with reference to the arrangements that had been made for the government of the kingdom until her return. It appeared that only a couple of days after the King of Inderabad had despatched those messengers, who, as we have already seen, waited upon Indora at her villa, he was seized with a sudden illness, which in a few hours proved fatal. But the instant his physicians told him that the worst was to be apprehended, he ordered all the troops of the capital to be marshalled in the great square in front of the palace, that they might take the oath of allegiance to his daughter who was absent. It was scarcely necessary to require this display of loyalty on their part: for the different regiments, on learning what the object was, marched to the great square proclaiming Indora's name. The dying King ordered his attendants to bear him forth upon a balcony, whence by signs he expressed his gratitude to the troops and their commanders. In a few hours afterwards he had ceased to exist. For three days the inhabitants of Inderabad hung their houses with black draperies in token of mourning for their deceased monarch; and then, the funeral being over, there was a brilliant illumination, for three days also, in honour of their Lady-Sovereign. The late King had no near relatives with the exception of Indora: and this was so far fortunate, that there was no pretender to dispute her claim to the throne. A Regency was formed, consisting of a council of five of the highest dignitaries of the country, all of whom were devoted to the late monarch and his living daughter; and the two Commissioners who now waited upon Indora, were at once despatched off to England to communicate all these tidings.

The new Queen listened with a profound interest to everything thus imparted to her; and in suitable terms she expressed her acknowledgments to the Commissioners for the loving loyalty that had been shown her and for the wise measures that had been adopted. As a token of her gratitude, she bestowed upon each a ring of immense value; and she dismissed them for the present, bidding them return to her upon the morrow.

Indora was now once more alone: but not for many minutes was she left to her reflections,—for Sagoonah shortly reappeared, to announce the arrival of Mr. Redcliffe. The Commissioners had said nothing to the ayah in respect to the object of their visit; but she suspected what it was—yes, she suspected that her mistress was now a Queen! Indora would have informed her of the fact: but the announcement of the arrival of him whom she

had been expecting, made her heart flutter once more, and afforded her not the leisure for the moment to hold any conversation with her dependant. She hastily bade Sagoonah introduce Mr. Redcliffe; and the ayah's eyes—those burning, brilliant, haunting eyes—flashed forth strange fires as she turned to executo the bidding of her mistress. During her temporary absence, Queen Indora composed her countenance as well as she was able: but it was difficult indeed for cne of her fine feelings and affectionate nature thus to put off even transiently the traces of that sorrow which the intelligence of her father's death had excited in her bosom.

Mr. Redcliffe entered; and Sagoonah, having ushered him in, immediately withdrew from the apartment. We should observe that the incidents we are relating occurred some days after that interview between Mr. Redcliffe and the twins, when he inspected the memorials of their departed mother; and on this particular evening Christina had gone to pass a few hours with her brother Christian at Mrs. Macaulay's. Sagoonah was not therefore afraid of being detected while listening at the door of the apartment—and she did listen.

Mr. Redcliffe entered, as we have said; and at once taking the hand of the Queen—though he as yet knew not that she was aught more than a Princess still—he said, "Has your Highness reflected well on the note which I sent you the other morning by Christian Ashton?"

"I have reflected," answered Indora, in a tremulous voice, with downcast looks, and with blushing countenance: "and yet there was no need for it—because—because my love could know no change—it is immutable! it is immortal!"

"Then, Indora, I am here," resumed Mr. Redcliffe, "to fulfil the pledge which I gave you when last we met within these walls. I told you that I had a self-imposed mission to fulfil, and to investigate circumstances which were enveloped in doubt and mystery. In a word, before I dared think of love again, it was needful that I should ascertain the fate of one who——"

"No more!" interrupted the Queen: "I know all!"

"All?" echoed Mr. Redcliffe. "Yes—it *must* be so—or else you would never have gone——"

"Ah! you know that I went thither?" ejaculated Indora, at once penetrating his thoughts.

"Yes—but let me explain presently," said Mr. Redcliffe. "Tell me, Indora—how did you learn everything——"

"And I also will explain presently!" rejoined the eastern lady. "First let us speak of that which is nearest to us—and dearest at least to *me*. You have discovered that she whom you sought is no more——is it not so? is it not that which you would have me understand?"

"It is," answered Redcliffe. "And now listen to me, Indora. No man can be insensible of the boundless—the illimitable love which you have borne for me; and it is impossible I can repay it with ingratitude. On the former occasions when we met within these walls, I spoke—and perhaps spoke harshly—of my long, long detention in your royal father's capital: but *that* I have forgotten—or at least forgiven. I know that you love me, Indora; you have given many, many proofs of it—and it is not in my nature——no, by heaven! it is not in my nature to plant a dagger in such a heart as your's!"

"Clement," murmured Indora, "these words from your lips infuse an unknown happiness into my soul!"

"Yet listen to me again," resumed Redcliffe, still retaining her hand in his own. "The power of loving as I once loved—another——" and his voice faltered——"is dead within me. But if, all other circumstances apart, you can accept the hand of one who will esteem and cherish you—who will lavish upon you all that tenderness which your own long-enduring love so much merits,—if you can be contented with an affectionate friendship which in itself will be a real love,—then, Indora, you may claim me as a husband."

Tears trickled down the lady's cheeks—for her heart was full of ineffable emotions: the words she would have spoken died upon her lips—but to those lips she pressed Clement Redcliffe's hand.

"Listen to me again, Indora," he continued, himself deeply moved. "You are beautiful—the handsomest of living women! You retain too all the first freshness of your youth—the jettiness of your hair will not for years to come be streaked with grey—nor the lustre of your eyes be dimmed. But how different is it with me! Though still in my prime, so far as years are concerned, yet am I prematurely old. *My* hair is streaked with grey——and Oh! if the sorrows, the afflictions, and the wretchedness I have endured be taken into account, it were no marvel if I were bowed down as though it were with an intolerable burden!"

"Continue not thus, Clement!" interrupted Indora, pressing his hand to her bosom and then to her lips. "As I have assured you before, I repeat the assurance now—that I only behold in you the idol of my own imagination. I see you as you were when first I learnt to love you in the far-off city of Inderabad; and, Oh! I shall ever love you! Though all in an instant your hair were to turn white, and your form were to be bowed, and you were to present the appearance of old age's decrepitude, I should love you—Oh, I should love you just the same! And think you, Clement, that there is not gratitude mixed up with this love of mine? Think you I can be unmindful that it was you who were the preceptor of my childhood—who taught me whatsoever accomplishments I possess—and what is more," added Indora solemnly, and in the fervour of a grateful piety, "who instructed me in the sublime truths of Christianity? Or again, think you that I am unmindful of how you introduced the arts and sciences of civilization into my father's Kingdom—how you taught him a liberal and enlightened policy—and how by virtue of your lessons he was enabled to advance his people to the highest point of prosperity and happiness? No, Clement—I have forgotten naught of all these things; and thus you see how fervid gratitude is interwoven with my love!"

Never had Indora seemed more eminently beautiful than while thus giving expression to those eloquent outpourings which flowed from her very heart. There was something sublime as well as something ineffably touching in her loveliness at that moment—something grand and pathetic—splendid, and at the same time indescribably interesting, in her looks. Redcliffe would have been something less or something more than man if he

had not experienced a sentiment of pride at the thought of calling this inimitable being his wife. And he *did* harbour that feeling—not because she was a princess of the loftiest rank: he forgot at the instant her royal descent—he beheld in her only a magnificent, an interesting, a noble-minded, and a loving woman.

"Indora," he said, "never, never can I forget the words you have just spoken!—they prove all the generosity of your heart. But listen to me once again. You know *all*——yes, I am aware that you *must* know all; and therefore you are not ignorant of the horrible mystery——"

"Oh, Clement! there is justice in heaven," exclaimed Indora; "and that mystery will be cleared up! But even if it were *not*, think you that I——This is however a topic," she ejaculated, "on which we must speak presently!"

"Be it so," answered Redcliffe. "And now, Indora, if all these things be well weighed in your mind, and if you be firmly convinced that your life's happiness can be ensured by linking your fate with mine, the affirmative response shall go forth from my lip."

"Clement, I am thine!" answered Indora: and her head sank upon his breast.

He clasped her in his arms: she wept with a variety of conflicting feelings: for joy and sorrow were now strangely blended in her heart. Her love was to be crowned with happiness—but she had lost a father!

"Oh, Clement!" she murmured, "you know not what I feel—you cannot comprehend it! The hope of long, long years is about to be fulfilled; and I have it in my power to testify unto you all the immensity of the love which I experience. I know that you seek not for titles—that you care not for earthly honours: but you will at least feel a pleasure in being placed in a position which will enable you to do good to your fellow-creatures. Clement," she added, in a voice that rose with a sort of exultation, "it is not a Princess who offers you her hand: it is a Queen who can seat you by her side upon a throne, and who will rejoice to see her subjects governed by the wisdom and the philanthropy of such a man!"

"Indora, what mean you?" asked Redcliffe in astonishment. "Your father——"

"He is no more," replied the eastern lady. "This very evening, high dignitaries from my own kingdom have sought me here to communicate the intelligence. And, Oh! if you found me not weeping and displaying all the evidences of grief on account of my father's death, it was because until this moment I subdued all I felt—I veiled it to the utmost of my power—I would not seem sad when you came to tell me that you would accept me as your bride."

Mr. Redcliffe sympathized with Indora on the loss of her father; and they now went on to converse on those topics to which they had hitherto only alluded distantly, and which they had agreed to postpone until other matters were settled. But we need not penetrate further into the discourse which thus passed between them: suffice it to say that it was long and solemnly interesting to both.

It was a little past ten o'clock when Clement Redcliffe took his leave of Indora, and issued from the apartment,—leaving her to reflect upon the two main incidents of the evening, so conflicting and so opposite—one infusing sorrow and the other joy into her heart. Sagoonah had listened at the door until this leave-taking reached her ears; and then she glided down into the hall to be in readiness to open the front door for Mr. Redcliffe. He descended the stairs—he traversed the hall—Sagoonah opened the door; and as he turned to bid her good night, he was struck by the expression of her large brilliant eyes. They seemed to vibrate upon him with a light that made him for a moment tremble—with a lustre that was so sinister and so supernal, it smote him as it were with an unknown terror. The recollection flashed to his mind that this was not the first time he had seen those eyes thus flame and burn as they were fixed upon him: he stopped short, and was about to ask Sagoonah wherefore she thus regarded him,—when all of a sudden those eyes of her's were cast down—her demeanour became profoundly respectful—and Redcliffe suffered the question to remain unasked.

He bade the ayah good night—and issued from the dwelling: but as he traversed the garden, and thence continued his way along the lane leading towards the main road, he felt as if he were still followed by Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XCV.

THE CONSERVATORY.

THE dusk was setting in on the evening of the following day, when two individuals who had been walking and holding a long discourse together in the neighbourhood of Oaklands, shook hands and separated. One was Purvis, the old steward, who now retraced his way towards Marchmont's ducal seat: the other was Clement Redcliffe, who hastily struck across the fields in the direction of a cottage where he had been wont to take up his quarters on the three or four occasions that he had visited this part of the country.

In a few minutes he reached the road, along which he had to continue his way for about a quarter of a mile, in order to arrive at that cottage: but he was destined to experience an adventure ere that walk, brief though it were, was accomplished. For as he was proceeding along, it struck him that he observed a female form lying by the side of the road in the shade of the hedge. He approached the object, and found that his surmise was correct. A female lay motionless there, with her face downward; and Redcliffe was instantaneously smitten with the idea that it was a corpse which he looked upon. He hastened to raise her up; and so far as the obscurity of the evening would permit, he saw that she was decently clad, that she was a woman of tall stature, and that she possessed the remains if not of actual beauty, at least of a countenance that had not been ill-looking. The woman was comparatively young too—not many years beyond thirty: but she had a haggard careworn aspect. Her eyes were closed: the warmth of life was however in her; and Redcliffe was thus relieved from the idea that he was gazing upon the victim of a foul crime, or of starvation, exhaustion, or of sudden natural death.

The cottage, as we have said, was at no great

distance: and thither Mr. Redcliffe hastily bore the woman in his arms. The occupants of the little habitation at once received her: for they were entirely obedient to the will of Mr. Redcliffe, whose liberality as a paymaster they had experienced on more occasions than one. The unconscious female was placed upon a couch; and by the means adopted to restore her she was so far brought back to life as to leave little or no apprehension as to the result. Still she continued in a state of unconsciousness as to what was passing around her; and having slowly opened her eyes, she closed them again,—their temporary expression being full of a listless vacancy.

"She cannot be an ordinary tramp," said Mr. Redcliffe to the woman of the cottage. "Perhaps she is subject to fits——"

"Or else she fell down, sir, through sheer exhaustion? For look! her shoes are completely worn through—aye, and the stockings likewise!—her poor feet are all cut and bleeding. I will foment them with hot water; and this may likewise tend to bring her back to consciousness."

"Do so," said Mr. Redcliffe. "But perhaps it would be as well to ascertain if we can who she is? Probably," he added, as the circumstances of Crazy Jane flashed to his memory, and suggested the remark he was now making,—"she may be some unfortunate idiot who has escaped from her friends: for her apparel is decent, and she has not the air of one who by ordinary circumstances could be reduced to houseless wanderings, penury, and destitution. I will leave this room—and you can join me presently in the parlour, when you have searched her person thoroughly; so that if there should happen to be any letters or papers about her, you can bring them to me."

This scene took place in a bed-chamber to which the woman had been borne; and Mr. Redcliffe descended to the parlour which he occupied at the cottage. In about ten minutes the elderly female who was left in attendance upon her, and who was the mistress of the little habitation, rejoined Mr. Redcliffe, who instantaneously perceived that she bore several articles in her hands.

"The poor creature is very far from being a common tramp," said the woman: "for, look here, sir!—there is a purse well filled with gold and silver—several jewellery-trinkets—and this sealed packet."

Mr. Redcliffe took the articles; and opening the purse, he found that it contained about twenty guineas: the jewels were old fashioned, and might be worth a similar sum: the sealed packet had no address upon it.

"Is the woman recovering?" he inquired.

"She every now and then opens her eyes, sir," was the response,—"looks vacantly up—and then closes them again. I am pretty sure she will recover: but what are we to do with her? If she has any friends, they may be anxious about her——"

"That is precisely what I am thinking," said Mr. Redcliffe; "and therefore, although under any circumstances I dislike opening private papers,—yet on the present occasion such a course seems absolutely necessary. Go back to the poor woman—do your best for her—and in the meanwhile I will see whether this packet will afford us any clue to the knowledge of who she is."

The elderly female retired from the parlour, and Mr. Redcliffe broke the seal of the packet. It contained a letter the address of which made him start suddenly; and he unhesitatingly commenced the perusal of the document. It was a long one: and profound was the interest with which Mr. Redcliffe scanned its contents. When he had concluded, he remained for some minutes absorbed in a profound solemn reverie; and then he murmured to himself, "Truly the finger of heaven has of late been manifesting itself in signal and marvellous ways for the development of the deepest mysteries! Here is another link in the chain of evidence——But who can this woman be?"

In a few minutes the mistress of the cottage reappeared,—saying, "Have you discovered, sir, who she is?"

"No," replied Mr. Redcliffe; "and more than ever am I anxious to make that discovery. By a singular coincidence this letter regards a certain business in which I am deeply interested: but it affords no clue as to who the woman herself may be. Does she get better?"

"She still lingers in a sort of swoon," was the answer: "but two or three times she has again opened her eyes; and once her lips moved as if she were trying to say something. What do you think, sir, had better be done? Ah, here is my old man come back from the village!" ejaculated the woman, as the cottage-door opened at the instant and heavy footsteps were heard in the little passage which divided the two ground-floor rooms of the humble dwelling.

"He must hasten off to the village again and fetch a surgeon," answered Mr. Redcliffe. "Go and tell him to do so."

The woman issued from the room; and her husband almost immediately took his departure again, for the purpose of executing the commission with which he was now charged. His wife returned to the parlour, to see if Mr. Redcliffe had any further instructions to issue.

"I am compelled to go out again presently," said Mr. Redcliffe: "you must therefore continue to do your best for this poor woman; and when the surgeon arrives, you can tell him under what circumstances she was discovered in the road. You may mention, if you choose, that she possesses this money and these trinkets: but you will say nothing about the sealed packet,—of which I shall retain possession, at least for the present. If the poor creature herself returns fully to consciousness before I come back—and if she should ask concerning her property—you can show her that her money and her jewels are safe; and you can tell her that the packet is in the hands of the gentleman who found her in the road—that he will take great care of it—and that he wishes to have some conversation with her in respect to its contents."

Having issued these instructions, Mr. Redcliffe resumed his cloak: for the evening was chill, and a mist was rising. Going forth from the cottage, he pursued his way for a short distance along the road—and thence he struck into the fields, across which he proceeded in the direction of Oaklands. It was now about nine o'clock in the evening; and the mist was growing into the density of a fog. A stranger in those parts would not have found his way towards the mansion through the obscurity: but Mr. Redcliffe appeared to be well

acquainted with every inch of the ground; and he soon reached the spacious gardens belonging to the ducal country-seat. He halted at the pediment of a particular statue; and there in a few minutes he was joined by the old steward Purvis.

Only a few words were exchanged between them; and they proceeded together towards the mansion. They reached a large greenhouse or conservatory, which was built against the length of one entire side of the edifice, and into which the windows of a suite of three rooms opened. The reader will therefore understand that there were means of communication from those rooms with the conservatory: but we must add that there was likewise a door opening from the conservatory itself into the garden. It was towards this door that Purvis and Mr. Redcliffe proceeded; and the old steward opened it by means of a key which he had taken care to have about him. Mr. Redcliffe entered: Purvis gently closed the door behind him—and hurrying away, re-entered the mansion by another mode of ingress.

Into the conservatory looked the windows of the dining-room that was used on ordinary occasions, as well as those of the library and billiard-room. From one of these apartments only were lights now shining; and this was the dining-room. Within that room two individuals were seated at a table covered with dessert and wine: these individuals were the Duke of Marchmont and the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

Mr. Redcliffe advanced cautiously and noiselessly—amidst the rare exotics, the choice plants, and the tropical trees with which the conservatory was crowded — towards the window which was nearest to the table where the Duke and his guest were seated. The draperies were so far drawn over all the windows that they only suffered the light to penetrate through narrow openings; and thus, as the reader will understand, the casements themselves were almost completely veiled from the eyes of those who were seated inside the apartment. Through the opening in the curtains Mr. Redcliffe noticed them; and with the utmost caution he unfastened the casement. Doubtless he had been already informed by Purvis that he might risk this much; and he had also received the assurance that the casement would yield to his touch. It did so: and opening it to the extent of two or three inches, he could now overhear whatsoever passed betwixt the Duke and his guest. So well built was the conservatory, and so warm was the air therein from the effect of artificial heat, that no draught could penetrate through the opening of the casement; and thus there was nothing to lead the Duke or Mr. Stanhope to suspect that the window was open at all. We must add that Stanhope sate with his back to Mr. Redcliffe; and consequently the Duke of Marchmont had his face towards him.

"And now will your Grace at length be explicit?" inquired Stanhope, as he filled his glass from one of the exquisitely cut decanters.

"Let us take a little more wine," responded the Duke, "before we get to the dry details of business."

"So far from taking any more wine," said Wilson Stanhope, "I think I ought to keep my head clear: for it can assuredly be no ordinary matter on which your lordship is about to speak."

"I admit that it is important," rejoined the Duke: "I have already told you so."

"But *more* important, I fancy," observed Stanhope, "than your Grace has hitherto given me to understand. At first you were to enter into explanations the other night at the Clarendon Hotel, when I dined with you——"

"I do not think that I promised to be explicit on that occasion," answered the Duke. "I merely told you that after our wine, on that particular evening, I would take and introduce you to your intended mistress, the beautiful Marion; and I fulfilled my promise. In a word, Stanhope, I have been true to every promise I made you; the five hundred pounds were paid into a banker's to your account——"

"Yes, my lord," interrupted Stanhope, "you have done all this; and it is because you have done so much that I can judge of the importance of the service, whatever it may be, in which you seek to engage me. You could not, or you would not, tell me in London: but you make an appointment for me to meet you privately down here——"

"To be sure!" ejaculated Marchmont,—"where we could dine together *tête-à-tête*, as we have done—and where without fear of being interrupted or overheard, we may discuss the service that I need at your hands."

"And now, the sooner that discussion commences, the better," observed Stanhope. "I am open to almost anything: but I love not suspense. It is like groping one's way in the dark——And, ah! by the bye, my lord, I hope that whatsoever new task you are about to confide to me, will not be baffled and defeated so completely as the former one was——I mean with respect to that affair of the Duchess——"

"Enough!" interrupted the Duke impatiently. "Think you that I could for a moment misunderstand your meaning?"

"And now with regard to the present business?" said Stanhope.

"You are a man," resumed the Duke of Marchmont, "of expensive habits—accustomed to luxurious living; and the sum of five hundred pounds which I paid into your account the other day, will prove but as a drop to the ocean in comparison with your lavish mode of expenditure. Indeed, you are a man, Stanhope, who ought to be able to reckon your money by thousands instead of by hundreds."

"If all this," exclaimed Stanhope, "is to lead to the assurance that your Grace can put me in the way of gaining thousands, it will assuredly be the most welcome intelligence that I shall have heard for a very long time past."

"It is the truth that I am telling you!" rejoined the Duke of Marchmont: and then he added after a pause, in a lower tone, and fixing his looks significantly upon his guest, "It is not five, nor ten, nor fifteen thousand pounds that I should hesitate to place in your hands, if you could only accomplish the aim which I have in view."

Mr. Redcliffe fancied that Wilson Stanhope must have been astounded by this announcement: for although he could not see that individual's face, he could nevertheless judge by his manner, as well as by his prolonged silence, that he was gazing in a sort of stupefied amazement upon the Duke of Marchmont. As for the Duke himself, he kept

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his eyes riveted with a peculiar significancy upon Stanhope, as it endeavouring to foreshadow by his looks that further elucidation of his purpose which he hardly knew how to shape in words. For even when villain is talking to villain there is a height of villany which embarrasses the one how to propose it in all its hideous details to the other. The lustre of the lamp shone full upon the countenance of Marchmont: a few minutes back it had been flushed with wine—but now it was very pale; and it wore so sinister an expression that Redcliffe shuddered, and could even have groaned in his horror, were he not sensible of the necessity of keeping on his guard, and were he not likewise thoroughly master of his feelings and emotions.

"So many thousands of pounds!" said Stanhope, at length breaking that long silence, and speaking as if he were still in a state of wondering incredulity. "Why, my lord," he added in a voice that became suddenly hoarse, "it can be little short of murder that you wish me to do at such a price and for such a reward!"

"And if it were," said the Duke, in a tone that was scarcely audible to Mr. Redcliffe at the casement,—"would you——"

"Would I undertake it?——But this is ridiculous!" ejaculated Mr. Stanhope. "Your Grace is playing a part—heaven knows for what purpose!—or else you are joking. And let me tell you that the jest is a very sorry one!"

"And if I were *not* joking," said the Duke,—"if I were serious——"

"Then I should say," rejoined Stanhope quickly, "that having got hold of a man whose circumstances were the other day desperate, and may soon become desperate again—you are holding out to him such a temptation——But, pshaw! you do not mean it!"

"I tell you that I mean it," answered the Duke, with the air of a man who was suddenly resolved to beat about the bush no longer, "but to come to the point."

"You mean it?" said Stanhope: and then there was another long pause, during which they eyed each other with that significancy which characterizes villany when coming to an understanding with villany.

"Now listen to me," resumed the Duke of Marchmont. "We are speaking within four walls; and I know it is impossible there can be any one to overhear us. If you fall into my views, good and well: but if you think to draw forth explanations from my lips in order that, *without* executing my purpose, you may henceforth exercise a power over me,—you will be mistaken! For were you perfidiously to breathe a syllable in betrayal of what is now taking place, I should indignantly deny it: and who would believe your word against that of the Duke of Marchmont? You see that I am speaking candidly, Stanhope—because candour is necessary under the circumstances."

"I do not find fault with your Grace for thus acting," answered Stanhope; "and now at least I know that you are serious. Proceed, my lord: there can be no harm done in giving your explanations."

"They are brief," responded the Duke; "and not many minutes need elapse ere you will have to come to a decision. There is a certain woman ——a lady I ought to call her——who by some means has mixed herself up most unpleasantly in certain affairs of mine. She may mean nothing more than what she has hitherto done: or, on the other hand, she may mean a great deal more and is only biding her time. I have every reason to apprehend that this latter supposition is the true one:—therefore am I desirous——In plain terms, Stanhope, this woman is an enemy whom—whom I must——Perdition seize it! Let the words be spoken!——whom I must remove from my path. Ask me not for further explanations: but say—and say quickly, Stanhope—to what extent I may count upon your assistance?"

"Now, look you, my lord," said Wilson Stanhope. "As to whether I will do this or anything else for such a sum as fifteen thousand pounds—mark! you have said fifteen thousand pounds!—is a question speedily settled. I will. But in saying this, I can of course only speak conditionally. If there is very much risk—so much that one's neck must approach uncomfortably near a halter—I should think it is a venture on which you could scarcely expect me to embark. Therefore when I say I will do it, it is in the belief that you have already devised some plan which you merely require me to carry out."

"I have," answered the Duke of Marchmont. "The lady of whom I am speaking, frequently walks in her garden in the cool of the evening; and although we are now entering upon the autumnal month of September, yet I know that she still continues her rambles in that garden, apparently absorbed in reverie, even after the dusk has closed in. Sometimes she is accompanied by a young lady who lives with her—at other times she is attended by a female servant: but occasionally she is alone. Of this I am assured: for during the last fortnight I have frequently watched in that neighbourhood."

"Proceed, my lord," said Stanhope, refilling his glass.

"It is for you to seize an opportunity when she is alone," continued the Duke of Marchmont: "there are approaches to her residence by which you may steal thither unperceived——"

"Stop, my lord!" said Wilson Stanhope: "all this is very well—and I comprehend you easily enough. A dagger or a pistol would rid you of this female enemy of your's. But what about the reward? If once the deed is done, what guarantee have I that my recompense is forthcoming? Will you give it me first of all?"

"First of all?" echoed the Duke. "And then what guarantee have I that you will perform *your* part?"

"Now your Grace sees the difficulty," coolly remarked Wilson Stanhope. "In plain terms, we cannot trust each other. You will not give me the reward beforehand: and I will not undertake the business without the prepayment of the reward. Suppose that I did—and suppose the deed to be done: I come to your Grace—you assume the indignant—you play the virtuous—you repudiate me—and what redress have I? To threaten in such a case would be foolish: your lordship would laugh at my threats! As for carrying them out, it would be madness; because on my part it would be giving my neck to a halter, with only the remote chance that you would swing next to me on the same gibbet."

"You refuse, therefore," said Marchmont.

"I refuse," replied Stanhope,—"unless every shilling——No!" he interrupted himself, "I will effect a compromise with you. You have specified the recompense at fifteen thousand pounds: give me the half—seven thousand five hundred—and I swear to do the deed, trusting to your honour to pay me the remainder."

The Duke of Marchmont deliberated for some moments, with vexation and bitter annoyance visibly depicted upon his countenance: but suddenly breaking silence, he exclaimed, "I will do it."

"Give me your cheque, and full particulars in respect to the lady—her whereabouts—and so forth——"

"We will settle this matter at once," said the Duke. "I should have a cheque-book here: for I brought that writing-case down with me from London this afternoon."

Thus speaking, the villanous nobleman rose from his seat; and proceeding to a side table, took thence the writing-case to which he had alluded. Resuming his seat, he opened it, and drew forth his cheque-book. At that same instant Mr. Redcliffe opened the casement to a width sufficient to enable him to take his stand upon the threshold: for the window, be it understood, reached to the floor, and thus served the purpose of a glass door. The reader will recollect that he was enveloped in his cloak. He raised his right arm as if in a warning manner: the folds of the cloak flowing over it, partially obscured his countenance by intercepting the beams of the lamp which stood upon the table: yet his face could be seen, though with a shadow upon it, if the Duke of Marchmont were to raise his eyes from the desk. With his left hand Mr. Redcliffe held the crimson drapery aside:—and there he stood motionless.

"Now observe," said the Duke, as he began to fill in the date of the cheque,—"when you present this at the bank to-morrow, you must appear to be in high glee; and you must, as if boastfully, declare that you had a run of luck to-night and that this was the produce of the card-table. You understand me?"

As the Duke of Marchmont put this question, before he filled in the body of the cheque,—he raised his eyes: an ejaculation of horror burst from his lips—the pen fell from his hand—he reeled on his seat and sank senseless on the floor. At that same instant Redcliffe stepped back and closed the casement. The next moment he was outside the conservatory, the door of which he locked, and he hurried away. Regaining the statue where he had encountered Purvis about an hour back, he found the steward again waiting for him there, he having arrived at the place of appointment about ten minutes previously. Redcliffe spoke a few hasty words of explanation—returned the key to the old man—and hurried off.

CHAPTER XCVI.

THE HAND-BILL.

THE Hon. Wilson Stanhope was taken so much by surprise, and was seized with so much consternation, at the Duke of Marchmont's proceeding that he did not look round to ascertain what was the cause of his Grace's terror. Then, at the same instant that the vile nobleman sank upon the carpet, Stanhope sprang forward to raise him up; and thus when he did fling a glance towards the casement, the drapery had ceased to be agitated. Though utterly unable to comprehend the meaning of the circumstance, Mr. Stanhope thought it would not be well to summon the domestics to the Duke's succour: he accordingly bore him to a sofa—loosened his neck-tie—and by sprinkling water on his countenance, endeavoured to recover him. In a few minutes the Duke slowly opened his eyes—gazed vacantly up at Stanhope for a moment—and then, as if smitten by a sudden and terrific recollection, flung his horrified looks towards the casement.

No one was there: the Duke raised his hand to his brow—gave a low subdued groan—and then suddenly starting up, rushed to the window. Flinging aside the draperies, he opened the casement, and looked into the conservatory. He could see no one; and stopping short, he again raised his hand to his brow, muttering, "Could it possibly have been the imagination?"

"What in the devil's name ails your Grace?" inquired Wilson Stanhope, who had followed him to the threshold of the window. "What does all this mean? You have absolutely terrified me!"

"What does it mean?" asked the Duke, gazing vacantly at his questioner. "It means——But no! you cannot understand it!"

"Did you suppose, my lord," inquired Stanhope, "that anybody was listening or looking on? For if so, we may have placed ourselves in no very comfortable predicament——"

"It was nothing!—rest assured it was nothing!" hastily interrupted the Duke of Marchmont, making incredible efforts to regain his self-possession.

"Nothing?" ejaculated Stanhope impatiently—"it is preposterous to tell me that it was nothing, when you were so awfully alarmed. If I believed in ghosts, I should veritably fancy you had seen one."

"A ghost?"—and it was with a countenance as white as a sheet that the Duke of Marchmont now gazed upon the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

"By heaven," cried the latter, who was himself almost as much alarmed as astonished, "there must be something in all this! Did you fancy that you saw some one? He may have escaped!"—and Stanhope rushed to the outer door of the conservatory. "Locked! fast locked! But these windows—they belong to other rooms!—and see! the casements open! they are not fastened inside! My lord, if it were one of your domestics who is playing the spy upon you, I would counsel you to take heed. As for myself, I wash my hands altogether of the business you propose to me—I will have nothing to do with it—I wish to heaven that you had not even spoken to me on the subject! There is such a thing as running one's head into a noose at the very instant one thinks that safety and security are the most complete."

Stanhope spoke with considerable vehemence and excitement; and his speech had been interrupted by the hurried visits he paid to the door of the conservatory and to the casements of the adjoining billiard-room and library. The Duke

listened to him with a sort of dismayed stupefaction, as well as with haggard looks. He spoke not a word: but hastening, or rather staggering back like one inebriate into the dining-room, he tossed off a large bumper of wine. Then, still in silence, he replaced his cheque-book in the writing-case, which he was about to lock,—when Stanhope, who had followed him thither, laid his hand upon his shoulder. The Duke, who had not perceived that he was so near, started with a visible tremor; and again his haggard looks contemplated Stanhope with a kind of vacant dismay.

"My lord," said the latter, "there is something more in all this than I comprehend. Either you were smitten with a real terror or a fanciful one. If the former, there must be a real danger, which I now incur as well as yourself: and if the latter, you must have a very evil conscience. At all events it may be worth your lordship's while to keep on friendly terms with me; and therefore you will scarcely lock up that writing-desk until you have given me some token of——what shall we call it?—your liberality——that term will do:" —and Stanhope chuckled ironically.

For a moment the Duke of Marchmont appeared inclined to resist with indignation his extortionate demand: but a second thought induced him to yield. He accordingly drew forth the cheque-book, and filled in a draft for a thousand guineas instead of for upwards of seven times that sum, as he had at first intended. Stanhope took the cheque—glanced at its contents—and on seeing the amount, consigned it to his pocket with a complacent smile, as if he thought that when the sum had been dissipated he might reckon upon procuring more from the same quarter. He did not care to press the Duke for any farther explanation as to the scene which had taken place: he saw that the topic was an unpleasant one: but he had his suspicion that the hint he had thrown out relative to the darkness of the nobleman's conscience was very far from being incorrect.

The Duke remained abstracted and thoughtful for the rest of the evening; and Stanhope, anxious to escape from such gloomy companionship, retired early to the apartment which was provided for his reception. The instant that Marchmont was left alone, he rang the bell, and ordered Purvis to be immediately sent to him. The old steward soon made his appearance, with his habitual demeanour of respectfulness; and the Duke—motioning him to advance close up to where he had halted from a troubled walk to and fro—said in a deep voice, "Purvis, something strange again has occurred this evening."

"Strange, my lord?" said the old steward. "And what is it?"

"You remember that dream of mine—if it were a dream——But I begin to doubt——In short," added Marchmont, most cruelly perplexed, "I know not what to think——But who, Purvis," he suddenly demanded, "keeps the key of the conservatory?"

"It is always in my custody, my lord," responded the old steward. "When the head-gardener requires it, I give it to him: but he always restores it to me—for as Oaklands is so seldom occupied now by your lordship and her Grace, I am always afraid of a set of idle tramps and vagabonds getting into the place."

"Who has the key at this moment?—who has had it all the evening?" demanded the Duke hastily.

"It is here, my lord," replied Purvis, producing the key; "and the gardener has not had it in his possession since the forenoon."

"But those other rooms," said the Duke,—"think you that anybody could have penetrated into them?"

"Not without my knowledge, my lord," responded the steward: "or at all events not without the knowledge of at least some of the servants. But may I be so bold as to inquire why your Grace asks?"

"It is strange—most strange!" muttered the Duke to himself. "Can the dead reappear?—or if he be living, has he come to revisit these scenes which——"

"I am afraid," said Purvis, "that something unpleasant has occurred to your Grace: for your looks are very much discomposed——"

"Enough for the present!" interrupted Marchmont. "I possess a feverish fancy when I think of certain things. Take care, Purvis, that all the doors are carefully locked before you retire to rest. And look well through all the rooms—behind the draperies—in every nook and corner, indeed; for the house is spacious—and it is so easy for any evil-designing person to enter and hide himself. See that you attend to my instructions: but do not appear to be more assiduous on these points than usual in the presence of the other domestics."

The Duke of Marchmont waved his hand for Purvis to retire; and he then proceeded to his own chamber, where he locked himself in.

We must now return to Mr. Redcliffe. After parting from the old steward at the statue, he sped along in the direction of the cottage, where he had left the unknown woman whom he had picked up in the road, as already described. During the short space of time occupied in retracing his way towards that cottage, Mr. Redcliffe reflected upon all that had occurred at Oaklands; and most painful were these reflections. That Queen Indora was the object of the Duke's murderous machinations, he well knew: but that he had paralysed them he was almost equally certain. And now, on his return to the cottage, he hoped to be enabled to receive some explanation from the stranger-woman's lips as to how she had become possessed of the letter contained in the sealed packet: but he was doomed to disappointment. For, on re-entering the cottage, he at once learnt from the mistress thereof that the woman was gone.

"Gone!" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe. "What do you mean?—that she is gone of her own accord? or that the surgeon ordered her to be removed?"

"No, sir," answered the elderly female: "she went away of her own accord."

Mr. Redcliffe passed into his little parlour, the mistress of the house following him; and he then learnt the following explanations:—

Shortly after he had left the cottage on his visit to Oaklands, the woman had begun to rally far more rapidly than at first; and she soon recovered her consciousness. She exhibited mingled terror and astonishment at finding herself in a strange place: then she rapidly felt about her person in search of her property. The mistress of the cottage

at once bade her banish all alarm from her mind, for that she was where she would be taken care of well: she then showed her that her money and her trinkets were safe. But the stranger-woman demanded the sealed packet which she had had about her person; and then the mistress of the cottage stated what Mr. Redcliffe had bidden her announce: namely, that it was taken care of on her behalf by the gentleman who had picked her up in the road, and that he wished to have some conversation with her on the subject. The stranger-woman demanded who the gentleman was—but the mistress of the cottage, accustomed to be very discreet in all that regarded her occasional lodger, gave some evasive response, which only had the effect of increasing the stranger's apprehensions. She vowed that she must depart that instant—that she had a long journey to perform, and important business on hand—that she could not therefore wait. The elderly female, fancying that her unfortunate guest was half bereft of reason, entreated her to remain: but nothing could induce her—and she took her precipitate departure, forcing upon her hostess a few shillings in payment of a pair of shoes which the latter insisted upon her taking as substitutes for her own worn-out ones. Thus, when the surgeon arrived, the woman who was to have been his patient had taken her departure.

"There is something exceedingly mysterious in all this," said Mr. Redcliffe. "That woman is no unfortunate idiot, as I had at first supposed: she must be conscious of some misdeed that she has fled thus precipitately. Did she give you no explanation of how she came to sink down upon the road?"

"She said something about exhaustion," was the reply given by the mistress of the cottage; "but she would not tarry to eat so much as a morsel of bread: she merely took a cup of milk—and when I offered to put some food into a little basket for her, she did not appear to listen: she seemed all in a flurry, as if afraid of something, so that I myself thought she could not be altogether right."

"And the surgeon?" said Mr. Redcliffe, inquiringly.

"He rode across on his pony; and on finding that the woman had gone, he grumbled a little—until I assured him that there was a gentleman here who would pay him handsomely. He then went away better pleased. But my husband is not come back from the village yet; and I can't think what detains him."

Scarcely had the woman thus spoken, when the outer door of the cottage was heard to yield to the entrance of some one; and this proved to be the husband on whose account she had been getting anxious.

"Why, what has detained you?" she asked. "You never yet have been given to tippling at the alehouse——"

"And I'm not going to do so now, wife," he replied. "But in the first place there's so thick a mist one can hardly see a yard in front of one; and then Smithers the carrier had just arrived, and he had brought with him some handbills from Guildford, which we all got reading at the bar of the Blue Lion."

"And what are the handbills about?"

"Oh! about some dreadful things that have been discovered up in London yonder—a house where it's supposed three or four people have been murdered at different times, and buried with quicklime in a pit. And so these bills are to offer a hundred pounds' reward to any body who gives the people into custody—what's their names again? Oh, here it is in large print—John Smedley and his wife Barbara—or fifty pounds for either of them separate."

"Let's look," said the woman: and she proceeded to read one of the handbills which her husband had brought with him. "Well now, this is odd!" she ejaculated in a voice of mingled wonder and terror: "why, the description of the woman—dear me! it is the very same! Tall—dark—fine eyes—good teeth—age about three or four and thirty——"

Here the woman's ejaculations were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of Mr. Redcliffe. The colloquy between the husband and wife had taken place in the passage; and the door of Mr Redcliffe's parlour stood ajar. He could not therefore help overhearing what thus passed; and when the conversation took the turn just described, he issued forth, inquiring, "Where are these handbills?"

One was immediately given to him: he hastily scanned its contents; and not a doubt rested in his mind that the woman who had been the object of so much kind attention on his part, was proclaimed as a murderess. The old man of the cottage—who, be it recollected, had not seen the woman at all—was stricken with dismay on learning what sort of a character had been within the walls of his dwelling; and he was by no means sorry to find that her stay had been comparatively so brief.

"It were madness," said Mr. Redcliffe, after a few moments' reflection, "to think of overtaking her through this dense fog. Besides, she has got at least an hour and a half's start of us; and then, as she has money too, she will find means of conveyance. My good friends," added Mr. Redcliffe, "as you are well aware that I have no inclination to be talked about, and do not want my name mentioned, it would be quite as well if nothing were said about the vile woman having been in your cottage. The cause of justice will not suffer on that account: for with this distribution of handbills all over the country, and with the other means which the police are doubtless taking for the detection of herself and her husband, those wretches cannot possibly escape,"

The cottager and his wife, who were accustomed to pay implicit obedience to Mr. Redcliffe, promised to be silent in respect to the subject he had named; and when he took his departure at an early hour on the following morning, he rewarded them with even more than his accustomed liberality. But in respect to the paper which had fallen into his possession, what could he think? That its writer had been murdered, and that he was one of the victims to whom the contents of the handbill so terribly pointed. Yes—this was the natural though fearful conjecture which suggested itself to Mr. Redcliffe's mind: but he resolved to set inquiries on foot in order to ascertain if any certain clue could possibly be discovered to the fate of the writer of that letter.

CHAPTER XCVII.

A STRANGE GUEST AT OAKLANDS.

THE Duke of Marchmont, as we have said, retired to his own chamber and locked himself in. But he did not seek his couch: he felt that it were useless to lay himself down thereon, for that he could not sleep. His soul had received a shock far more profound than even Wilson Stanhope himself had suspected at the time.

The Duke first of all examined the room carefully,—even condescending to look beneath the bed and behind all the draperies; and with an equal degree of scrutiny did he search the dressing-room adjoining. We have used the word *condescend* because it is ever a humiliating thing for a man to admit even unto himself that he is a coward; and with some haughty minds it is a difficult thing for them to bend to any proceeding that in itself proclaims their cowardice. But the Duke of Marchmont was indeed a coward now; and it was conscience that made him so.

Having completed the investigation of his bedchamber and the dressing-room adjoining, the Duke opened his pistol-case and proceeded to load the weapons. But in the midst of the operation he desisted: he pressed his hand to his brow—and murmured to himself, "If *he* be really alive, can I —can I do this?" and he glanced shudderingly at the pistols in the open case.

He threw himself upon a seat, and reflected profoundly. Slow but deep—gradual but strongly marked, were the workings of his countenance, as varied thoughts passed through his brain.

"What can all this mean?" he asked himself: "what omens are portended? Why was it that *she*—that eastern woman—came hither? and why does she seem to be taking up a cause with which she can have no earthly concern? And why does *he* haunt me now? Oh, would that I could persuade myself it were all a dream! But if she—that eastern lady—were removed from my path—and if *he*—*he* likewise ceased to exist—what cause of future apprehension would remain?"

The Duke rose from his seat, and slowly paced to and fro in the chamber. At length he halted at the table on which the pistol-case lay; and as if suddenly making up his mind, he muttered between his teeth, while his countenance assumed an air of fierce resolve, "Yes—by heaven! anything —no matter what—so long as I clear my path of those who dare plant themselves in it!"

The Duke then finished loading the pistols; and he deposited the case on a small table by the side of his bed.

"Now," he said, with a demoniac savageness settling for the instant upon his features, "*he* may come again if he will; and if it be in the corporeal substance that he comes—if it be as a living denizen of this world—by heaven, his next appearance shall be the last! Without compunction —without remorse, will I stretch him lifeless on the floor! No more pusillanimity on my part!—no more vain and idle terrors!—for it is only by my coward yielding to them that he has been encouraged to renew his pranks and endeavour to work upon my fears. Fool, fool that I was to betray myself in the presence of Stanhope! But it is for the last time. And now, despite his declaration that he washes his hands of the business I propose to him, he shall undertake it; and by rendering him criminal—by making him an accomplice, I shall cease to be at his mercy, as I now more or less am: for unfortunately the incident of this evening has given him an advantage over me."

The Duke of Marchmont endeavoured to persuade himself—or we might even say, strove hard to make himself feel that his mind was now composed and settled once again since he had resolved upon a particular course of action: but he could not shut out from his convictions that his soul had received a shock from which it was by no means so easy to recover. The sense that it was so, was brought all the more powerfully home to him when he began to disapparel himself for the purpose of seeking his couch; and then he suddenly stamped his foot with rage as he felt that he was afraid to go to bed! He walked to and fro—he sate down and took a book—he rose up again—his restlessness was increasing.

"But how could *he* have got there?" the Duke suddenly asked himself. "The door of the conservatory was locked—and no one could have entered the library or the billiard-room unperceived by at least some of the domestics. Ah!" ejaculated the Duke within himself; "if he were really there, then he must be there now! Egress was impossible!"

As this idea struck the Duke of Marchmont, a devilish notion at the same time flashed to his brain. He nerved himself with all his energy to carry it out: he forced upon himself the thought of how much depended upon it: his features grew rigid with desperate resoluteness—and he determined to do that which had just entered his head. Resuming the apparel which he had cast off, the Duke secured the pistols about his person; and taking a light, issued from his chamber.

He descended the staircase, and first of all entered the billiard-room. With the taper in one hand, and the other ready prepared to seize upon a pistol, the Duke searched the place—but found no one. He passed into the library: an equally rigid search was instituted there — and still no one. Thence he passed out into the conservatory—saying to himself, "Perhaps if I had only searched this place well at the time, I might have found him crouched behind one of the trees or in some dark nook."

It was no longer with the slightest scintillation of cowardice, but with a stern, dogged, savage resoluteness of purpose, that the Duke of Marchmont pursued his investigation here—but all to no effect. He examined the outer door—and it was fast locked, as when Wilson Stanhope had himself examined it.

"Can he be still in the house?" asked the Duke of himself: "or was it after all naught but an illusion?——or worse still, was it—was it a spirit from the other world?"

Now all in an instant his resoluteness melted away—a cold shudder ran through him—his looks were swept in recoiling terror around; and he felt as if the least indication of anything supernatural would crush and overpower him in a moment. A multitude of horrific fancies swept through his brain: his countenance was ghastly white; and he

felt his heart beating with so painful a violence that it appeared as if he had just been abruptly awakened out of a hideous dream.

"Fool, fool that I am!" he said to himself: "at one instant bold to desperation!—at another the veriest coward that walks the face of the earth! Perhaps after all he is secreted elsewhere in the house: for how, *on that other occasion*, could he have procured admittance within these walls. By heaven, I will not rest till I have searched the place throughout!"

Again was the fortitude of the Duke of Marchmont returning; and he was about to issue from the conservatory to return into the library and thence regain the other part of the mansion,—when all of a sudden it struck him that he beheld a human countenance looking in at him through the glass. The taper nearly fell from his hand: the next instant the face was gone—but his ear distinctly caught the sound of rapidly retreating footsteps. Thus satisfied that it was indeed a living being, but having no particular idea of the appearance of that countenance which he had seen looking in upon him, the Duke hastened from the conservatory—sped through the library—and in a few moments reached the private door which was so frequently mentioned in earlier chapters of this narrative. Of this door he always had the key: he opened it—and leaving the taper in a recess, he rushed forth.

"Now, by heaven! if it is *he*," the Duke thought within his own breast—and he found himself nerved with an extraordinary strength of mind, or rather we should say, a satanic resoluteness of purpose,—"if it is *he*, death—death!"

He stopped and listened: the sounds of footsteps reached his ear from a particular direction; and thither he sped with a swiftness that amazed himself. He could however see nothing—for there was a thick fog: but he knew every inch of his own grounds well, and could thus keep to the gravel-walk even though rushing on at so fleet a pace. The retreating footsteps became more distinct. Marchmont then knew that he was in the vicinage of a grass-plot; and by transferring his route to the soft yielding turf, the sounds of his own steps were no longer audible.

All of a sudden the footsteps of the other ceased: then in a few minutes, they appeared to be coming hastily towards him; and the Duke stood still. Nearer came those steps: then they suddenly ceased again, as if the individual was stopping short to listen; and then they came on once more. The Duke of Marchmont had a pistol in each hand; and he was resolved to fire the very moment he should obtain the certainty that it was he whom he sought—he whom he feared—he whose life he had made up his mind to take! Nearer came the footsteps: they were advancing more slowly along the gravel-walk: they were heavy steps, as if they were clumsy shoes or coarse boots that were thus treading;—and Marchmont thought within himself, "It cannot after all be *he!*"

A few moments put an end to the Duke's uncertainty; for a figure was revealed to him through the mist; and he himself was simultaneously revealed to that individual.

"Hands off, whoever you are!" growled a ferocious voice: "or I'll dash your brains out—blow me if I don't!"

"Move not another inch," said the Duke, with stern intrepidity: "or I send a bullet through *your* brains!"

"I'm only a poor feller," responded the intruder, "which has lost his way in this cursed fog: and I didn't go for to do no harm."

"If that be the case," answered the Duke, "I will do you no harm either. But tell me—how came you to look into that conservatory just now?"

"Ah, well, I see you're the same gentleman which was in that place: but I wasn't after no ill. I saw the light—or should rather say, I came right bang agin the place in the midst of the fog, and should have gone smash through it glass and all, if so be that it wasn't for that there glim as you carried in your hand."

During this brief colloquy, the Duke of Marchmont had leisure to contemplate the intruder more narrowly as his eyes grew accustomed to the obscurity which prevailed. A suspicion arose in his mind; and another instant's scrutiny of that villanous hangdog countenance confirmed it. He now knew beyond any farther doubt who this man was; and it appeared to him as if he were suddenly thrown in his way in order to become an instrument in the carrying out of his designs.

"My poor fellow," he said, assuming the most compassionating voice, "you are evidently a houseless wanderer: and so far from blaming you for having involuntarily intruded on my grounds, I pity you. What can I do for you? Do you require food? and shall I show you a loft over the stable where you may rest yourself for the night? Be not afraid: I am the Duke of Marchmont—and I flatter myself that no poor man has ever had any reason to complain of harshness or unkindness on my part."

"I'm werry much obleeged to your lordship," was the intruder's response; "and if so be 'tisn't axing for too much at this time o' night for a meal of wittels, I should be uncommon thankful."

"Come with me, my poor man," replied the Duke, in the same compassionating voice as before; "and I will see what I can do for you. This way."

Marchmont acted as if he had not the slightest suspicion of the fellow's true character; and in this manner he conducted him towards the private door of the house. While proceeding thither, the ill-looking intruder eyed the nobleman askance, in order to penetrate his purpose and assure himself that he was really safe: but he saw nothing on the part of the Duke to make him apprehend any treachery. His circumstances were desperate: for though he had money in his pocket, yet he was well nigh famished, from the simple fact that he had not dared approach any habitation during the day, much less enter any village or hamlet, in order to purchase food. He accordingly resolved to accept the proffered kindness of the Duke: for he felt tolerably well convinced that he incurred no peril in so doing.

Marchmont conducted him over the threshold of the private door, which he immediately locked; and taking the taper from the recess, he led the way towards the servants' offices,—the ill-looking man following. Proceeding to the larder, the Duke said, "Take whatever you fancy: be not afraid—I do not things by halves."

The man lifted down a cold joint: another shelf

supplied bread and cheese; and the Duke bade him bring the food into the servants' hall. Then his Grace showed him where to draw a jug of strong ale, and bade him sit down and eat. The man most readily and joyously obeyed: he placed himself at the table, and commenced a mighty inroad on the sirloin,—prefacing it however with a deep draught of the old October ale. The Duke sate down at a little distance; and without appearing to look towards his strange guest, was nevertheless contemplating him furtively the whole time.

"It's werry kind, my lord," said the man, "for a great nobleman like yourself to take such compassion on a poor hard-working feller which has had no work to do for the last month——"

"Eat and drink," interrupted Marchmont; "and give me your thanks afterwards. Do not be afraid of making inroads on the provisions: there is more meat in the larder, and there is more ale in the cask."

Thus encouraged, the ill-looking guest renewed his assault on the sirloin, and paid his respects to the ale. He ate with the voracity of one who had been foodless for many, many long hours—as was indeed the case. At length he laid down his knife and fork, and drained the jug.

"Now," said the Duke, "replenish that jug—for I must have some little discourse with you. I have already given you the assurance that I do not things by halves; and I must see if I can be of service to you for the future."

The man lost no time in refilling the jug from the barrel of old October; and returning to his seat, he nodded with a sort of respectful familiarity to the Duke, saying, "Here's wishing your Grace all 'ealth and 'appiness, and many years to enjoy them good things which you bestows on a poor honest Christian like myself."

The Duke made no response: but rising from his seat, shut the door of the servants' hall; and then returning to his chair, he said, "We must now have a few minutes' discourse."

There was something in the Duke of Marchmont's appearance — something which seemed altered in his manner, that the ill-looking guest did not altogether like. He looked around him—fidgetted on his chair for a moment—appeared inclined to take up his club, which lay near his battered hat at his feet—then flung a furtive glance at the Duke again—and then had recourse to the ale jug, as if thence to derive fortitude and encouragement. When he deposited it on the table again, he perceived that the Duke was regarding him in a peculiar manner.

"Do not be afraid," said Marchmont; "and do not start nor grow excited—much less attempt any violence—I mean you no harm—but in a word, I know who you are!"

The fellow *did* start despite the injunction to the contrary; and again he made a motion as if to snatch up his club: but the Duke, instantaneously displaying a pistol, said, "Look! you are at my mercy. But be quiet——I tell you again that I will do you no harm. In a word, you can serve me."

"Ah! that's different," exclaimed the fellow. "I always like to hear that my services is needed—cos why, it shows that everything is square and above board."

"Yes—I know you," continued the Duke: "I recognised you within a few instants after our encounter; and therefore you may judge whether I mean you a mischief, considering the way in which I have treated you. Your name is Barnes—and you are known as the Burker."

"Well, my lord, I don't deny them's my names, titles, and distinctions; and if so be they ain't quite so high and mighty as your own, they're all werry well in their own way. I come of a werry respectable family, my lord: most of my ancestors was great public characters, and went out of the world before the public gaze amidst werry great applause. I'm rayther proud on 'em, though I says it which shouldn't say it."

"Now that you have done this long tirade," said the Duke of Marchmont, "perhaps you will listen to me."

"But first of all, my lord," interrupted the Burker, "perhaps you will have the goodness to tell me how it was you recognised me. I know that I'm a genelman of much renown, and that people in certain quarters makes theirselves uncommon busy in looking arter me and prying into my consarns."

"A few words of explanation will suffice," responded the Duke, cutting short that garrulity which received its inspiration from the strength of the October ale. "There have been accurate personal descriptions given of you in newspaper-advertisements, placards, and handbills——"

"Ah! my lord, see what poppilarity is!" said the Burker: and he again had recourse to the ale jug.

We may here pause for an instant to explain that the Duke of Marchmont had at the time, for reasons known to the reader, taken a great interest in the trial of Lettice Rodney: he had therefore closely watched the newspapers in order to see whether anything transpired relative to Madame Angelique's establishment, or showed that there had been a connexion in any sort of way between Lettice Rodney and himself. Thus was it that the Duke had been led to read the personal description that was given of the Burker, when the result of the trial proved that he, Mrs. Webber, and another were the actual murderers of the Liverpool lawyer. The Duke had since thought more than once that Barney the Burker was an instrument for whom he could find employment: and thus was it that the personal description of the ruffian had remained so faithfully impressed upon his memory. Infinitely disgusted was his Grace now with the coarse flippant familiarity which the Burker displayed under the influence of the ale: for refined villany loathes vulgar villany, although there may be no shade of difference between the actual criminality of either, and although the former may condescend or feel itself necessitated to make use of the latter. But Marchmont did not choose to assume an overbearing manner, nor to betray his disgust too visibly to the ruffian whose services he was now resolved to put into requisition.

"I can well understand," he said, "how it is that you are a houseless wanderer and that your condition is so deplorable. There is a reward set upon your head; and your predicament is more than ever perilous after your most recent exploits with the police-officers at the house some where in the southern side of London. Now, if I were to

afford you the means of disguise and to give you money—if I were also to hold out to you a prospect of a much larger sum, so that you might escape out of the country and get to America or France, or go out to Australia—anything, in short——"

"Your lordship may command me in every way," exclaimed the Burker, his hideous hang-dog countenance testifying the utmost joy. "There's nothing I'd stick at to serve so kind a friend as your Grace offers to prove towards me."

"Well and fairly spoken," rejoined the Duke. "I do indeed require a most signal service at your hands; and if you fulfil it, all that I have promised shall be done."

We will not dwell any longer upon the conversation that took place between the Duke of Marchmont and his miscreant companion: suffice it to say that the latter fully comprehended the dark iniquitous business that was entrusted to him, and swore to accomplish it. The Duke ascended to his chamber, and there procured a small phial containing a dye for the complexion, a black wig with frizzy curls, and a false moustache,—these articles having been required by his Grace for some masquerading purpose several years back, and having since remained forgotten until now in some nook of his wardrobe. He then took from a cupboard a discarded suit of apparel, which by accident had not as yet passed as "a perquisite" into the hands of his valet; and descending with these things, the Duke of Marchmont rejoined the Burker whom he had left in the servants' hall. The ruffian speedily metamorphosed himself according to the instructions he received and the means placed at his disposal, and of which he availed himself with infinite satisfaction and delight. By the aid of a looking-glass he dyed his complexion with a portion of the liquid furnished by the phial; and the Duke informed him how, by the purchase of a few simple things at a chemist's,

to form a similar decoction for future use. The appendage of the moustache concealed that peculiar formation of the Barker's upper lip which rendered him so easily recognisable; and the garments which the Duke supplied him, as well as the wig, aided in the accomplishment of the disguise. From amidst the quantity of boots and shoes which the male domestics of the establishment had left down-stairs to be cleaned by the underlings in the morning, Marchmont bade the Barker choose a pair that would fit him; and he did the same in respect to the hats that were suspended in the servants' hall. The Duke then placed a sum of money in the villain's hand—and bade him form a bundle of his own cast-off clothes, so that he might sink it in the first pond or stream he should reach.

All these matters being settled, the transmogrified Mr. Barnes took his departure from Oaklands; and the Duke of Marchmont returned to his own chamber.

"It was Satan's self," he thought within his own mind, "who threw this fellow in my way to-night! I can now dispense with the services of Stanhope,—which, after all, is an advantage: for he is more squeamish than I had fancied—whereas on the other hand this ruffian will do my business without compunction and without remorse. *Her* fate will soon be sealed; and now I have only to think what is to be done with regard to *him*—if indeed it be he himself in the living person, and not a spirit whom I have seen!"

CHAPTER XCVIII.

THE SAINT.

THE scene again shifts to London. In a well-furnished room at a beautiful little suburban villa, Mr. White Choker was seated upon a sofa with the mistress whom Madame Angelique had so kindly provided for him. This was Linda, the German beauty. She was dressed in an elegant *deshabillée*, consisting of a French muslin wrapper; and which, though it came up to the throat, nevertheless defined all the voluptuous proportions of her form. The rich masses of her auburn hair enframed her countenance with heavy bands, and were negligently knotted behind the well shaped head: for it was not yet mid-day and Linda's toilet had still to be accomplished.

Mr. White Choker was deeply enamoured of his beautiful mistress. Several days had now passed since he first became possessed of her: he firmly believed that she was *all but* virtuous when she came to his arms; and he was very far from suspecting that she was in the way to become a mother. On the occasion when we now find him seated by her side, he had only just arrived at the villa, where he had not passed the preceding night: for he could not too often adopt towards the wife of his bosom, the excellent Mrs. White Choker, the excuse "that he was going to keep a vigil of blessed prayer by the bed-side of a dear brother in the good work, who was lying at that extremity which was but the passport to the realms of eternal bliss."

Mr. White Choker was dressed in precisely the same style as when we first introduced him to the reader,—a black suit—a white neckcloth, displaying no collar—shoes and stockings, the former with very large bows;—while a capacious cotton umbrella kept company with his low-crowned hat which he had deposited on the carpet. How is it that all "saints" carry cotton umbrellas? A "saint" evidently does not consider himself perfect without such an appendage. However rich he may be, you will never see him with a silk umbrella: it is always a cotton one. If you peep into Exeter Hall, a glance will soon satisfy you that all the umbrellas which tap upon the floor at some peculiarly refreshing portion of the speaker's discourse, are stout cotton ones, and there shall not be a single silk one amongst them. A cotton umbrella is as inseparable from a gentleman "saint" as a brandy flask is from a lady "saint;" and perhaps there is an equal number of both umbrellas and flasks at every meeting at Exeter Hall or any other resort of the sanctimonious.

But to return to our narrative. Mr. White Choker sate upon the sofa next to Linda; and having toyed for some little while with her, he began to notice that the expression of her countenance was pensive even to mournfulness.

"Tell me, my dear girl," he said, in that whining canting tone which from long habit he now invariably adopted, so that even his professions of love were conveyed in an Exeter Hall snivel,—"tell me, my dear girl, what oppresses your mind? If you have secret woes, let your loving friend Choker share them: for when you smile, Choker shall smile—and when you weep, the faithful Choker shall weep likewise."

Two pearly tears were now trickling down Linda's cheeks; and Mr. White Choker, perceiving the same, thought it expedient to kiss them away in the first instance, and then to get up a little sympathetic snivel of his own in the second instance. In so doing, he pulled out his white kerchief; and, behold! a bundle of Tracts fell upon the floor. They were the newly published effusions of one of the most savoury vessels and most influential members of the Foreign Cannibal-Reclaiming, Negro-Christianising, and Naked-Savage-Clothing Society; and on receiving them that very morning, Mr. White Choker had assured his trusting and pious wife that he would hasten off to distribute them amongst the "benighted:" but instead of doing anything of the sort, he had sped, as we have seen, to the villa which he had hired for his mistress.

"But tell me, my dearest Linda," said Mr. White Choker, when he fancied he had gone through a sufficient process of snivelling, and turning up the whites of his eyes, and sighing and groaning, "tell me, my love, what it is that ails you? If you have any remorse for the life you are leading, set your mind at ease: for the good that I do in the world more than compensates for any *leetle* indiscretion or weakness of which I may be guilty; and the cloak of my sanctity covereth thee also, my dear sister——But hang it! I am not on the platform now! I really thought I was for the moment. Come, Linda dear, tell your own faithful Choker what it is that afflicts you; and he will do everything that lies in his power to contribute to your happiness."

"How can I ever tell you the truth?" said

Linda, sobbing and weeping,—"you who are so kind and good to me!"

"You speak, my love, as if you had deceived me in some way or another," said the sanctimonious gentleman; and his countenance grew considerably elongated. "Pray be candid: let me know the worst, whatever it is—yea, let me know the worst,"

"It is true," continued Linda, now wringing her hands, "that in one sense you have been deceived——I mean that something has been kept back——"

"What? what?" asked Mr. White Choker, fidgeting very uneasily upon his seat. "Madame Angelique told me you had only been once astray——"

"Ah! it was not in this that you were deceived, my dear friend," replied the weeping Linda: "for that was true enough. Oh! I never can tell you!"

"But you must, my dear—you must let me know the entire truth," said Mr. White Choker. "I can't conceive what you mean—I can't understand what it is you have got to tell. But pray be candid. You don't know what a fidget this uncertainty keeps me in: I am all over with a tremble. You don't think Snufflenose suspects——"

"No, nothing of that sort," responded Linda. "It is not any of *your* acquaintances——"

"Then some of your own?" hastily suggested Mr. White Choker. "Oh! my dear, how could you have been so indiscreet? Don't you know that I am a blessed saint, and that if the odour of my sanctity once became tainted by the breath of scandal——Oh, dear me! dear me: what would they say of me at Exeter Hall?"

"I am very, very unhappy," sobbed Linda, who appeared as if her heart would break: "and I wish I had never accepted your protection—for I am afraid——"

"Afraid of what?" asked the saint, still in a feverish excitement.

"That if my husband were only to dicover——"

"Your husband?"—and Mr. White Choker suddenly put on such a look of blank despair that his appearance was perfectly ludicrous.

Seized with consternation, overcome with dismay, and picturing to himself actions for *crim. con.* and all sorts of evils, the unfortunate gentleman rolled off the sofa and tumbled over his stout cotton umbrella and his broad-brimmed hat. Then, as he afterwards expressed himself, he groaned in spirit: and wished that he had rather become the companion of Esquimaux and white bears of the North Pole, or of benighted cannibals in the islands of the South Pacific, than have remained in the more salubrious and civilized region of his birth to have fallen in with a married woman. Linda besought the saint to pick himself up: but as he exhibited no inclination to do anything of the sort, but only lay sprawling and groaning on the floor, with his head crushing his hat and his nose rubbing against his cotton umbrella, the considerate young lady thought she had better try her own hand at picking him up. The saint suffered himself to be over-persuaded; and pressing Linda in his arms, he covered her with kisses,—groaning and whining most fearfully for no less a period than five minutes.

"And now tell me," he said, in a voice as if it were a schoolboy whimpering over a task that he could not work out,—"tell me all about this, my dear. How came you to be married? where is your husband? who is he? Is he a godly man? hath he the fear of the Lord before his eyes? But d—n him, whoever he is!"—and Mr. White Choker gave utterance to this ejaculation with an unction and emphasis which proved the sincerity with which this most unsaint-like malediction was expressed.

"If you will listen to me," said Linda, who still continued to sob and weep somewhat, "I will tell you all about it. You know I am a native of Germany. My father and mother were genteel people, living at Manheim; and about three years ago an English gentleman was stopping at the hotel exactly facing our residence. He became acquainted with us, and visited us frequently. He was very rich—a Captain in a Hussar regiment——"

Linda started as if a voice from the dead had suddenly spoken in her ear: for Mr. White Choker gave a groan so deep and hollow that it was really no wonder the young lady was thus terrified. A captain of Hussars! Good heavens, that his malignant planets should have possibly opened the way to throw him in contact with such a vessel of wrath, as the saint considered every military officer to be! A captain of Hussars. Why, he would sooner face all the Snufflenoses in the world—he would sooner have a committee of inquiry appointed by his Society to investigate his character, with the certainty that such committee should consist of all his sworn enemies—than stand the chance of facing a captain of Hussars! He would sooner be scourged thrice round Hyde Park than encounter such an individual! In a word, an hour in the pillory, and being pelted the while with rotten eggs, were a pleasant little pastime in comparison with the risk of being called to an account by a captain of Hussars!

"Pray, my dearest friend, do not make yourself so miserable," said Linda, plying all her little artifices and wiles, all her wheedlings and coaxings, and all her cajoleries to appease him somewhat. "I am very sorry——I was going to have told you the whole truth——but the instant I saw you, I conceived such an affection for you that I was afraid if you heard I was married——"

"Ah, well-a-day! the mischief is done, my dear," groaned Mr. White Choker. "Love is the forbidden fruit—and you are the Eve that tempted this wretched Adam"—and he slapped his breast—"to fall."

"Let me continue my narrative," said Linda, with one arm thrown round his neck. "This Captain—pray don't groan so—this Captain of Hussars——What? another groan?——Well, I must call him, then, by the name of Cartwright. Though many years older than myself, he sought me as his bride. I did not love him: I hated him from the very instant that I perceived his attentions began to grow marked. On the other hand my parents encouraged his addresses: he boasted of his wealth—he lived in good style—and they thought that such an alliance would be ensuring an excellent position for their daughter. It is the old tale: the child was sacrificed to the wishes of the parents—and I became the bride of the Hussar Captain——I mean of Cartwright," Linda hastily added; for another sepulchral groan came up from

the cavern-like depths of Mr. White Choker's throat.

She paused for a few minutes, during which she seemed to be sobbing bitterly; while the saint rocked himself to and fro, groaning each time he went backward, and whining each time he went forward: so that what with the alternations of the groan and the whine he made as sweet a music as ever emanated from the human throat.

"Three years have elapsed since that fatal marriage," proceeded Linda, in a low and mournful voice: "but only for one year did I live with that man. He treated me cruelly—he beat me——Oh! you have no idea of his dreadful violence—the infuriate gusts of passion——"

Another terrific groan escaped from Mr. White Choker's lips: his countenance was ghastly—he quivered and shivered in every limb. Visions of horse-whips and horse-pistols, of writs for *crim. con.*, of tribunals filled with big-wigs, of heavy damages, of columns of scandal in the newspapers, of Exeter Hall consternation, of select committees of inquiry, whirled around him as if Pandora's box had just been opened under his very nose and all the evils it contained were about to settle upon him like the plague of locusts. And amidst them all was the hideous countenance of Snufflenose, his great rival and arch-enemy in the sphere of saintdom, grinning maliciously at him. Unhappy Mr. White Choker! what was he to do?

"Yes," continued Linda, "at the expiration of a year I was compelled to leave that dreadful man—and I returned to my parents. He followed me—he told them such tales that they would not believe otherwise than that I myself was in fault, and that he himself was an angel of goodness, kindness, and virtue. They insisted that I should return to him; and in order to avoid such a dreadful fate, I fled from home, I came to England, and obtained a situation as governess in a highly respectable family: but my husband found me out and I was compelled to fly once more. I went to Paris, where I obtained another situation; and it was during one of Madame Angelique's temporary visits to the French capital that I happened to fall in with her. I believed her to be a highly respectable lady; and she begged me if ever I returned to London, to favour her with a call. I promised that I would. My husband came to Paris: I heard persons speaking of him—I learnt that he was ruined—that he was leading a terribly wild life: I hoped therefore that caring no longer for me, he might desist from his persecutions. But no such thing. He found me out—he insisted upon my returning to him—and again was I compelled to fly."

"And what did you do then, my poor dear Linda?" asked Mr. White Choker, with another deep lugubrious groan.

"Believing that my husband's debts rendered it unlikely that he would revisit England, I sped back to London, where I soon obtained another situation as governess. But my evil genius haunted me. A few weeks ago my husband reappeared; and again was I compelled to flee from a happy home. I was reduced to despair; and in an evil hour I encountered Madame Angelique. She invited me to her house—I went—its true character soon became known to me—she introduced a gentleman——and—and—from necessity I fell. I saw no one else until I came under your protection."

"And that *one* gentleman," said Mr. White Choker, shaking his head solemnly: "who is he? Some dashing young spark——"

"No—an elderly gentleman," responded Linda: "and I did hear it whispered that he was some high dignitary of the Church."

"Ah! then, my dear, there was no harm—no harm at all," said Mr. White Choker. "The sanctity of an individual glosses over any little failing. But about this terrible husband of your's ——Dear me! dear me! if I had known all this——"

"Ah! it is the idea of that husband of mine which makes me wretched!" moaned Linda.

"And you are almost sure that he will find you out—are you not, my dear girl?" inquired Mr. White Choker, quivering from head to foot.

"Let us hope not," responded Linda, suffering her countenance to assume a more cheerful aspect. "You will not desert me on that account —Oh! tell me that you will not desert me?"

But scarcely were the words spoken, when a terrific knock at the front door thundered through the house—the bell at the same time rang as franctically as if pulled by a lunatic just escaped out of Bedlam—and Mr. White Choker felt as if he were shrivelling up into nothing. But the next instant a thought struck this saint-like man: the instinct of self-preservation asserted all its power within him: a luminous notion inspired him.

"My dear girl—my dear sweet Linda," he said, "listen to me attentively. Look as pious, as holy, and as contrite as you can. Verily, we must clothe ourselves with the raiment of hypocrisy as the only armour wherewith to defend ourselves against him who cometh like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Ah! I hear his footsteps! Perdition and the devil take him. But no, no—that is not what I meant!"

Quick as lightning Mr. White Choker scud across the room as if a mad dog were at his heels; and partially opening the door, he flew back to his seat. Then he began to address Linda in a strain which for the first few instants filled her with a perfect astoundment.

"My dear sister in the good cause," said the saint, with the most approved commingling of snuffle and whine, whimper and snivel,—"yea, verily, we are all sinful creatures—we are all sheep that have strayed from the pasture. It is good, my sister, that I who am a man known in the tabernacles of the pious, and reputed to be a savoury vessel against which no scandal has ever dared breathe a whisper, should in this true brotherly fashion visit you from time to time. It is sweet, my sister, that we should sing hymns together; and anon I will expound unto you that text concerning which we were speaking just now. Well pleased am I to reckon you amongst the sheep of our fold; and you, my sister, will feel your soul refreshed by an attentive listening unto my discourse. Ah! my sweet sister, it is pleasant to escape from the vanities of this wicked world—to buckle on the armour of truth——"

"By heaven! it must be precious stout armour that will prevent me from lacerating your precious hide in such a way that your own mother shall not know you!"

Mr. White Choker felt as if he had been suddenly turned into a snowball and was rapidly melting away. The ferocious Cartwright strode into the room with clenched fists and a countenance convulsed with rage. He was dressed in plain clothes: but his moustache seemed fiercer, if possible, than even when he had burst into the presence of Mr. Softly, or of Lord Wenham. Linda shrieked and covered her face with her hands. Mr. White Croker was confounded on finding that his beautiful homily had produced no earthly effect; his countenance was ghastly—he wished that the earth would open and swallow him up. But the flooring of the house appeared by no means disposed to achieve any such spontaneous miracle for his especial behoof, all saint though he were.

"You vile woman!" vociferated Captain Cartwright: "so I have found you out again? But *this* time in what a position! Not earning your bread honestly as a teacher of the young idea how to shoot—but as the mistress of this hypocritical old vagabond. And talking about shooting, you shall very soon see if I won't try my hand at it. What do you mean, sir, going about seducing men's wives with that precious white choker round your throat?"

"My good friend—my worthy sir—my gallant Captain," stammered forth Mr. White Choker, "this dear lady is as pious a vessel——"

"Silence!" roared Captain Cartwright; "or I will very soon show you that your head is a vessel to be broken into a dozen pieces."

"But, my dear sir," resumed the wretched saint, "this is really too outrageous. I am a man respected in the congregations and of good odour in the tabernacles——"

"Such tabernacles as Madame Angelique's house of infamy!" exclaimed Captain Cartwright: "for there you were the other day—and there you met my wife. I can prove it. My lawyers can prove it. A highly respectable firm, sir——Catchflat, Sharply, Rumrig, Downy, and Co., Lincoln's Inn Fields——and if you don't see their names at the back of a writ, laying damages at five thousand pounds, in the course of this very day, then my name is not Hannibal Cæsar Napoleon Cartwright."

The miserable Mr. White Choker, who had risen from his seat, sank back again in perfect dismay at hearing those separate strings of names. The appellations of the legal firm denoted all the chicaneries of the law: the appellations of the gallant plaintiff himself denoted all his bellicose propensities. Meanwhile Linda, sitting apart, kept her countenance covered with her hands, and seemed as if she dared not so much as even steal a furtive glance at her husband, nor put forth a single syllable in appeal for his mercy. But a sudden idea struck Mr. White Choker: his only resource was to ride it with a high hand; and though it required a very desperate effort to screw up his courage to such a point, yet the circumstances of the case enabled him so to do. It was a sort of neck-or-nothing crisis—one of those emergencies which give energy to the veriest coward.

Rising up from his seat, he advanced a pace or two towards the ferocious Captain—but taking good care to pick up his cotton umbrella, so as to be in readiness to resist any sudden attack; and assuming a look sanctimoniously firm and deprecatingly virtuous, he said, "The character of a good and well-meaning man is not to be aspersed in this style. Peradventure I did verily go to the abode of the woman whom you call Madame Angelique: but it was for the blessed purpose of reclaiming those sheep which had strayed from the fold——"

"And so you take one of the sheep," vociferated the Captain, "and put her into a handsomely furnished villa?"

"Yea, verily—to reclaim her," responded Mr. White Choker, now speaking with a degree of assurance that astonished himself. "My visits hither have had the most godly purpose. It has been to reason with her on the past—to preach savoury homilies unto her—to infuse refreshing doctrines into her soul——"

"And these precious homilies of your's are so long," retorted the Captain, with a ferocious sneer, "that you have to pass the whole night with her at times—eh?"

"Prove it—I defy you to prove it!" ejaculated Mr. White Choker, his assurance heightening into effrontery through the very desperation of his position: and he moreover flattered himself that he could place implicit reliance on the fidelity of the servants belonging to the villa.

"Now look you, Mr. Saint, or whatever you are," exclaimed the Captain, "it is all very well for you to assume an air of innocence: but you are safe caught in a trap. I know everything. You won't have a leg to stand upon if you go into a court of justice; and you'll have Mrs. White Choker and all the little Chokers pointing their indignant fingers at a bad husband and a worthless father."

"We shall see," said the saint gruffly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself to go on in this manner before your virtuous wife. Speak to her, sir—she will tell you of what holy and blessed nature our intercourse has been, so that not even have we gone as far as to exchange the chaste kiss of peace."

"Linda," said Captain Cartwright, now speaking in a tone of mournful reproach, "you imagine that you have had wrongs to complain of at my hands. But my fault has been in loving you all too well——"

"Oh, do not speak to me! I cannot endure it!" cried the weeping Linda. "I feel—oh! I feel that I have wronged you much—that I have exaggerated your little ebullitions of temper——"

"Confess that you have dishonoured me!" said the Captain: "throw yourself upon your knees at my feet and reveal everything. It will be some atonement——"

"Linda my love—Mrs. Cartwright, I mean—dear sister in the blessed cause I would say," stammered out Mr. White Choker, now affrighted, wretched, and discomfited once again, "you would not betray me——I mean—I mean, you would not say anything against me—or tell an untruth——"

"Linda," broke in Captain Cartwright, "I command you to speak with frankness! On what terms are you living with this man? Are you not his mistress?"

"Oh, I must tell the truth!—this is dreadful!"

shrieked forth Linda: "but I must tell the truth!" —then falling on her knees at Captain Cartwright's feet, she said, "Yes—it is so——Alas! that I must confess it! But deal mercifully with *him*—he has treated me well——"

"Enough," said the Captain, giving a terrific twirl to his moustache. "Rise, Linda, and compose yourself. You at least have made by this confession all the atonement that was in your power; and though henceforth everything is at an end between us——"

Captain Cartwright stopped short; and turning abruptly round, seemed to be wiping away his tears with a scented cambric handkerchief. Linda rose from her knees; and not daring to throw a single glance upon Mr. White Choker, she sank on a chair apparently convulsed with grief. As for the saint himself, he stood the very picture of wretchedness and misery: but yet there was something ludicrous in the expression of his woe-begone countenance.

"Sir," said Captain Cartwright, advancing towards him, "what reparation can you make me for having torn an angel from my arms?"

"My good friend—my very dear friend," faltered the saint, "I—I—don't think you could have missed the angel very much—seeing that she has long been absent from your arms——"

"She would have come back, sir—and I should have received her were she not thus polluted! But enough of this trifling," ejaculated the Captain, with a fierce sternness. "Will you dare deny any longer that this lady—my wife—is your mistress? Come, sir, speak out, or by heaven——"

"Pray, pray don't use any violence," implored the wretched Mr. White Choker. "I—I confess that appearances are against me: but—but—for the sake of my family, whom I have brought up as savoury vessels, having the fear of the Lord before their eyes——"

"Sir, I myself am a Christian," interrupted Captain Cartwright, "and I can forgive so far as forgiveness be possible. But you must confess, sir——"

"Well, well, I confess—and—and—if five hundred or a thousand pounds—will—will—hush up this little matter—and make all things pleasant——"

At that moment footsteps were heard coming from the landing: an individual, with an air of jaunty self-sufficiency, and very gaily dressed, made his appearance, the door having continued ajar the whole time. Mr. White Choker was now perfectly aghast: for the conviction smote him that a witness had overheard everything that had taken place; and he might have been knocked down with a straw when Captain Cartwright said, "This, sir, is Mr. Downy, a member of the legal firm of which I have spoken."

Mr. Downy closed the door; and seating himself at the table, drew forth a bundle of papers, tied round with red tape, and of that ominous length, fold, and general appearance, which seemed to indicate that all the moral tortures of the law might be wielded at the discretion of this gentleman.

"A very painful business, Mr. Choker—a very painful business," said Mr. Downy. "Sorry to be compelled to serve process on a pious gentleman like yourself. But it can't be helped. If saints will be sinners, you know—ha! ha!—they must take the consequences. Let me see," continued the legal gentleman, as he proceeded to fill up a long slip of parchment and then arranged a corresponding slip of ordinary paper to be likewise filled up. "Here's the original—and here's the copy. Damages five thousand—eh, Captain?"

"Not a farthing less, sir!" responded Cartwright fiercely, as if he were offended that there could even be a doubt as to the price that he put upon the angel he had lost.

"Very good, Captain," said Mr. Downy: "damages five thousand. You hear, Mr. Choker? I keep the original: where shall I serve the copy? Will you take it? or will you refer me to your solicitors? or shall I just leave it at your own house as I pass by the door presently? It will be no trouble: I will give it into Mrs. Choker's own hand—and none of the servants will know anything about it. The trial will come on in November—Court of Common Pleas. Ah! it will be a rare excitement, as sure as my name is honest Ike——I mean Downy."

The reader may conceive the awful state of mind into which Mr. White Choker was thrown by these terrible proceedings. Five thousand pounds damages—a writ ready drawn out—and the whole affair certain to obtain a fearful publicity in the course of the day! The miserable saint looked at Mr. Downy, but beheld not the least encouragement in the insolently leering expression of his countenance. He looked at the Captain: but this gallant officer of Hussars was twirling his fierce moustache with the sternest resoluteness of purpose. He looked towards Linda: but that fallen angel whose departed virtue was appraised at five thousand pounds, was still covering her features with her hands and sobbing convulsively. Mr. White Choker turned up his eyes to the ceiling, and gave vent to a hollow groan. Mr. Downy, approaching him with an air of jaunty familiarity, held the ominous copy of the writ between his finger and thumb: and as if suddenly recollecting something, he said, "By the bye, there will be one witness we shall want—and perhaps, Mr. Choker, you would have no objection to give me his address——I mean Mr. Snufflenose."

This was the crowning stone of the entire fabric of Mr. White Choker's misery. Snufflenose of all persons, as a witness against him! He was now desperate. Clutching Mr. Downy by the lappel of his coat, he dragged him aside,—hastily whispering with nervous agitation, "For heaven's sake get this settled! Pray save me from exposure—I could not survive it. It would be my death! Only conceive, a man in my position to be dragged before a tribunal! Talk to the Captain—offer him a sum—implore him to be reasonable——"

"Look you here, Mr. Choker," said Mr. Downy, drawing the saint into a window-recess: "I am not a harsh man—and our firm is above pressing on a case for mere paltry costs. You will do well to settle it: for it is a terrible black affair—beats 'Higgins *versus* Wiggins' all to smashes, and 'Biggins *versus* Sniggins' all to shivers. Come, you're pretty warm—ha! ha!—warm in two ways," chuckled Mr. Downy, who seemed of a jocular disposition; "warm in love and warm in

purse. Now then, what shall we say? Three thousand?"

"Three thousand?" groaned Mr. White Choker, with a countenance uncommonly blank. "It's a very large sum——"

"Yes; but the injury inflicted is very large also," responded Mr. Downy. "Take my advice—it's only six and eightpence you know;"—and here the facetious gentleman chuckled again. "Don't haggle at a few pounds. To settle it for three thousand, and a fifty pound note for my costs, will be dirt cheap. In fact, between you and me and the post," added Mr. Downy, in a mysteriously confidential whisper, "the Captain will be a cursed fool if he settles it at all. He's got a capital case—a capital case. Why, sir, it beats cock-fighting."

Mr. Downy evidently thought that this last argument was a smasher; and poor Mr. White Choker was too miserably bewildered to discern any incongruity in the metaphor. He pleaded hard for Mr. Downy to reduce the demand to a couple of thousand: but the legal gentleman was obstinate. At length he said, "Well, I must see what I can do. I have a great respect for a pious man like yourself; and I shouldn't like to see you driven out of society, and poor Mrs. White Choker drowning herself in the Serpentine, leaving all the little Chokers to misery and wretchedness. No, no—that isn't the way business is done by honest Ike Shad——Mr. Downy, I mean, of the eminent firm of Catchflat, Sharply, Rumrig, and Co."

With these words the pseudo-lawyer—whom our readers have had no difficulty in recognising as an old acquaintance—accosted Captain Cartwright, and drew him aside. Mr. White Choker kept groaning inwardly, as he watched them with most anxious suspense. For several minutes Mr. Downy appeared to be pleading very energetically on the saint's behalf, so far as could be judged from his gesticulations: while the Captain seemed to be listening with a stern and dogged resoluteness. At length this gallant gentleman, as if growing impatient, exclaimed vehemently, "No, not one farthing less! Serve the writ, Mr. Downy."

"No, no!" cried the wretched saint imploringly: "let us settle it at once—anyhow!"

"It's the best thing you can do, my dear Sir," hastily whispered Mr. Downy, as he again accosted the unfortunate Mr. White Choker. "Sit down and draw the cheque—three thousand and fifty guineas."

"Pounds," said the miserable victim.

"*Guineas!*" rejoined Mr. Downy emphatically. "The Captain will only treat with guineas as a basis: that is his ultimatum."

Mr. White Choker gave another deep groan, it being about the six hundredth that had come up from his cavern-like throat on this memorable day: but resigning himself to his fate, he sate down and drew up the cheque according to dictation.

"And now," said Mr. Downy, "we will pitch these things into the grate:"—and he tore up the writs, both original and copy, into infinitesimal pieces, for fear lest they should be collected in order to form the groundwork of a prosecution for conspiracy to extort money under false pretences.

Having written the cheque, Mr. White Choker's mind became relieved of a considerable load; and he looked towards the chair which Linda had occupied a few moments back. But she was gone: she had flitted from the room.

"And now good morning to you, Sir," said Captain Cartwright. "For your own sake you will keep this business as secret as possible."

"Good bye, old fellow," said Mr. Downy, with a singular leer upon his countenance. "You behaved uncommon well after all; and you'll bless the moment you listened to the advice of honest Ike Shadbolt."

The Captain and his acolyte passed out of the room, closing the door behind them. For a few instants Mr. White Choker sate bewildered. A suspicion had flashed to his mind: its growth was marvellously rapid: it amounted to a certainty—he saw that he was done. He started up to his feet: he stood for an instant—and then he rushed to the door. Just as he opened it, he heard a sort of titter or giggle in a female voice. Was it possible?—the musical voice of his Linda! She was descending the stairs with the two men. Mr. Choker was on the very point of shouting out "Stop, thieves!" when it struck him that he would be thereby provoking the very scandal and exposure which he had paid so heavily to avoid. He dashed his hand against his forehead, and gave vent to a curse bitter enough to electrify ten thousand Exeter Hall audiences if there had been so many and if they had happened to hear it. He rushed to the window: and lo! he beheld Captain Cartwright gallantly handing Linda into a cab,—both of them evidently in the highest possible spirits. As for Mr. Downy—or honest Ike Shadbolt, as he had proclaimed himself to be—he was almost convulsed with laughter; and looking up towards the window, he waved his hand with the most impudent familiarity at Mr. White Choker. The cab drove off at a rattling pace; and we need hardly inform the reader that its first destination was the establishment of the saint's bankers in order to get the cheque cashed.

Mr. Choker, on beholding the vehicle thus disappear, rushed up stairs to Linda's chamber; and a glance at its condition showed him that she had carried off all the jewels and valuables which he had presented to her. A similar research in the dining-room made the saint painfully aware that the handsome service of plate he had bought for her use, had likewise disappeared. He threw himself on a sofa—buried his head in the cushions—moaned and groaned—swore and snivelled—whined and whimpered—and wished himself at the hottest place he could think of, and in the society of a personage whose name must not be mentioned to polite ears.

But the cup of his humiliations and miseries, though full enough, heaven knows! was yet to be made to overflow. The servants, consisting of a footman and three females, had got something more than an inkling of what had passed: for they had been carefully listening on the stairs. Accordingly, these amiable beings, on whose trustworthiness the saint had flattered himself he could so implicitly rely, suddenly made their appearance in a posse, and requested to know his intentions. With affrighted looks he intimated his purpose to pay them their wages at once and decline their farther services. The footman, as spokesman,

made sundry and divers demands for compensation in lieu of proper notice; and he pretty plainly intimated that something in the shape of hush-money must likewise be forthcoming. To all these demands Mr. Choker found himself compelled to submit: and it cost him a pretty penny to purchase the silence of those individuals. The villa was given up that very day; and Mr. White Choker returned into the bosom of his family a wiser if not a better man. But the next time he attended the committee of the Foreign Cannibal-Reclaiming, Negro-Christianising, and Naked-Savage-Clothing Society, he for a long time sate on thorns for fear lest the affair should have got wind. As Snufflenose was however silent, Mr. Choker gathered courage: but for many a long day afterwards he groaned as he walked about—and at night his excellent better half fancied that he must be troubled with indigestion because of the restlessness of his dreams.

CHAPTER XCIX.

THE CHATEAU.

THE scene now changes to the south of France.

In the neighbourhood of one of those beautiful villages which ornament the valleys on the outskirts of the Pyrenees, stood a large, old-fashioned, rambling, dark brick edifice, known as the Chateau. It had originally belonged to a noble and ancient family which had emigrated during the troubles of the first revolution; and that family had become extinct in a foreign clime. The Chateau was once the centre of a spacious and fair domain: but this had become parcelled out into small farms and allotments—so that at the time of which we are writing—namely, a few years back—the lands which had once constituted the domain of a single individual were in the possession of at least a score of different proprietors.

The Chateau itself had long been shut up; and with only the garden remaining attached to it, it had become the property of a lawyer in the adjacent village. Having been neglected for a great number of years, the building had sustained considerable injury; and the lawyer, finding it difficult to obtain a wealthy tenant, had felt by no means inclined to lay out money in repairing a place which seemed destined to remain empty. It was only fitted from its dimensions for the occupation of a wealthy family having a large establishment of servants; but no family of such means was likely to take a mansion that had such a small patch of land attached, and this surrounded by the allotments of poor proprietors. Besides, it would have required thousands of pounds to furnish the Chateau suitably; and as no rich family would think of burying themselves entirely in that seclusion, but would assuredly pass at least a moiety of the year in the gay capital, it was equally improbable that any one would incur such an enormous expense to furnish the Chateau as a mere temporary residence for a few months at a time. It must likewise be observed that superstition had lent its aid to render the old Chateau all the more difficult to let; and thus, as we have said, for many long years it had remained empty.

At length, some five years previous to the date which our story has reached, an elderly French gentleman, accompanied by his daughter, and attended only by one female domestic, arrived in the neighbouring village—where they took lodgings for a few weeks. We will presently describe them more particularly. Suffice it for the present to say that M. Volney—for this was the gentleman's name—began to make inquiries about the Chateau; and after some little negotiation with the lawyer, he took it. Everybody in the village was surprised: for there were several small and picturesque houses to let in the neighbourhood, any one of which would have been large enough for the accommodation of so small a family as the Volneys. But on the other hand, the Chateau was to be let at a rental less than even that of either one of the houses just alluded to; and it was therefore conjectured that this might be a consideration with a man whose means were evidently exceedingly limited. Indeed, the rent asked of him for the Chateau was to be little more than a mere nominal sum for the first term of seven years. Superstition, as we have already said, had given the Chateau a bad name; and the lawyer to whom it belonged, naturally anxious to improve his property by amending its repute, calculated that if respectable people lived in it for a period, its former character as a haunted house would be forgotten. And then, too, M. Volney undertook to make certain repairs, as well as to restore the garden: and thus, under all these circumstances, the lawyer was well enough contented with a comparatively nominal rental.

On the other hand, the Chateau seemed to suit M. Volney's disposition and frame of mind—and according to conjecture, his pecuniary means likewise. He was a man bordering upon sixty at the time when we purpose to introduce him to our reader. Somewhat above the middle height, he was thin; and though still in possession of full activity of limb, yet his pace was invariably slow, as if measured according to the solemn gloom of his thoughts. His countenance was pale with the evidences of some deeply seated sorrow indelibly stamped upon it. His gaze was cold and searching: no one at the first glance, or at the first meeting with M. Volney, would become prepossessed in his favour. His manners were as cold as his looks: there was something in them which repelled an advance towards friendship, and seemed to render an intimacy impossible. He spoke but little—never unnecessarily—and as much as possible in mere monosyllables. Yet despite that glacial gaze—that freezing manner—that undisguised dislike for conversation, there was an unmistakeable air of good breeding about M. Volney—that gloss of the courtly drawing-room which when once it invests the individual, can seldom be shaken off, any more than a talented person can by ordinary circumstances be rendered stupid or a well-educated one can become ignorant.

M. Volney was in the habit of taking long solitary walks; and yet it could scarcely be for the sake of the beautiful surrounding scenery, inasmuch as the sense of that or of any other enjoyment appeared to be dead within him. When he was encountered by any one of the rural inhabitants in those walks, he was invariably proceeding at the slow measured pace we have already alluded

CLARINE AND ZOE.

to—his eyes were bent down—and his whole demeanour indicated a deep pre-occupation of the thoughts. If out of respect the rustics saluted him as they passed, he would just acknowledge the compliment with a cold courtesy, in which however nothing of pride seemed blended: but he never stopped to exchange a syllable of conversation. When indoors, he was principally occupied in a little room which he had fitted up as a study or library, and the shelves of which contained a few books—but these of a sterling description. They consisted chiefly of scientific works, voyages, and travels, with a small sprinkling of the best French poets. There, in that study, M. Volney would pass hours together: though whether he were always reading, or whether he were much of that time communing with his own painful thoughts, was scarcely known even to his own daughter.

This lady was, at the period when we propose to introduce her to our readers, about two and twenty years of age. She was not above the middle stature—somewhat full in figure, but of good symmetry. She was neither handsome nor beautiful: but at the same time she might be pronounced good-looking. A profusion of dark brown hair—brows somewhat strongly pencilled—large hazel eyes—lips that were full and pouting, but not coarse—together with a splendid set of teeth,—these may be rapidly summed up as her leading personal characteristics. Her nose was not perfectly straight: it had a slight, but very slight downward inflexion, though not to the extent that warranted the application of the French term *retroussée*. Her countenance was the least thing too much rounded to be consonant with perfect beauty; and there was even something sensuous in the configuration of the chin as well as in the formation of the mouth. Yet such was not the impression that would remain upon the mind of an observer in respect to her character; inasmuch as her eyes beamed only with innocence—her manners were modest and retiring—and her bearing was replete with a becoming lady-like dignity. Such was Clarine Volney, at the age of twenty-two.

The female servant who originally accompanied the father and daughter to that neighbourhood, was a middle-aged woman, of respectable and matronly appearance. She had evidently been long in the family; for she regarded Clarine with that degree of affection which is shown by faithful domestics who have known young people from their birth, and in their childhood have nursed them upon their knees. In the presence of M. Volney, Marguerite—which was the female servant's name—was careful to address the young lady as *Mademoiselle*: but when they were alone together, she allowed herself the liberty of calling her *Clarine*. And Clarine herself displayed much attachment towards Marguerite, and never issued orders as if conscious of speaking to an inferior. We should observe that immediately after taking the Chateau, M. Volney hired a second female-servant, and also a gardener; so that his domestic establishment consisted of three persons.

A sufficient number of rooms in the central part of the building had been fitted up for the use of the family. At the nearest town M. Volney had purchased such furniture as he required; and though there was nothing elegant nor luxurious in the appointment of the rooms thus rendered habitable, they were nevertheless replete with every comfort. The Volneys received no society and courted none: thus the few genteel families who resided in the neighbourhood, had abstained from calling upon them, inasmuch as they afforded no indications that such visits would be acceptable. We should however make an exception in favour of the village priest—a man well stricken in years, noted for his benevolence of disposition and the purity of his life; and this worthy minister of the Gospel was the only visitor from amidst the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The reader may marvel what the old Chateau in the south of France and the Volney family can have to do with the progress of our tale: we may therefore at once proceed to state that if any interest be felt in the amiable and beautiful Zoe, the wife of Lord Octavian Meredith, she must now be sought within the walls of that Chateau.

Some explanations are requisite to show how this came about. We have already said that the Volney family had inhabited the Chateau—or rather a portion of it, for about five years previous to the time when we now introduce them upon the stage of our narrative. To say that M. Volney was an affectionate father, would be to imply that towards his daughter he unbent in a way of which his frigid demeanour seemed perfectly incapable. Nor did he. He was kind in his manner—and nothing more. Every morning, when entering the breakfast-parlour, Clarine imprinted a kiss on her father's cheek—the same at evening ere retiring to her chamber: but he merely received these filial salutations—he gave them not back in the form of paternal caresses. He never displayed any fondness towards her—much less lavished endearments: but on the other hand his demeanour was always of a uniform kindness—never capricious, and never finding unnecessary fault. Clarine was so accustomed to this demeanour on her father's part that she did not miss a fondness she had never experienced, and she had not to deplore the loss of a more tender love—for she had never known it. Her mother had died in her infancy: her father was always towards her what we now describe him; and never for a single instant had it occurred to Clarine that there was aught deficient of a parent's true tenderness and affection on his part.

Five years had Clarine passed in the comparative solitude of that Chateau without a single lady-acquaintance, and with only the occasional visits of the priest to break in upon the monotony of this mode of life. During all that while it never seemed to have struck her father that he was keeping her out of that society which one of her years might naturally be supposed to crave. But all of a sudden he one day asked her whether she felt her mode of existence lonely? She replied in the negative: and she spoke the truth—she had grown accustomed to it. He nevertheless hinted at his intention to procure her some suitable female companionship; and he even went so far as to express a regret that he had not done so before. This was saying a great deal for M. Volney—and Clarine, so little accustomed to such expressions from her father's lips, regarded the observation as one indicative of the utmost love and kindness.

Several weeks went by after that little conversation, the subject of which appeared to have totally

escaped M. Volney's memory. He took his solitary walks as usual—shut himself up in his study as much as heretofore—and left his daughter as completely to her own resources as ever. But during this interval Clarine herself seemed likewise to have ceased to think of her father's transient promise: for instead of her spirits suffering from a prolonged monotony of the life she was leading, they grew gayer and more cheerful than they were before. Thus, when one day, at the expiration of six weeks or a couple of months, her father told her with his accustomed abruptness that she would now at length have female companionship, she looked as if taken by surprise, and even as if the announcement afforded her not the slightest pleasure. But she was accustomed to pay implicit obedience to her sire's wishes; and she therefore offered not a syllable of objection: while he, on his part, did not seem to notice that the communication was received with less satisfaction than it might have been.

The announcement itself was made as the result of some little conversation which had taken place between M. Volney and the village priest. It appeared that a young and beautiful English lady of rank, attended by two female domestics, had arrived at the village, on her way to seek some other part of the Pyrenees as a temporary residence. Being an invalid, she was detained by indisposition for some days in the village; she took a liking to the surrounding scenery; and she resolved to make a halt in that neighbourhood. During a visit to the picturesque little church, she had formed the acquaintance of the priest; and in the course of conversation she had expressed a desire to be received into some genteel but very quiet and secluded French family. The priest was already aware of M. Volney's desire to vary the monotony of his daughter's life; and he mentioned to him Lady Octavian Meredith's wish. The result was that Zoe, attended by her two domestics, took up her abode with M. and Mademoiselle Volney at the old Chateau.

Zoe had been given to understand that M. Volney, having experienced many griefs and cares during his life, was unfitted for society, and was of misanthropic habits: but the worthy priest had told her on the other hand that she would find in Clarine Volney a gay and amiable companion. And such proved to be the case. While M. Volney continued his solitary walks, or remained shut up in his study, Zoe and Clarine were almost constantly together. They soon formed a friendship which ripened into an affection for each other; and Lady Octavian Meredith appeared not to notice the gloom and sombre aspect of the old Chateau, so well was she pleased with the friend whom she had found there.

Lady Octavian was in ill-health; and this appeared in Clarine's estimation to affect her spirits somewhat—but in respect to her beauty, to render it all the more touchingly interesting. Zoe's countenance wore a sainted expression of true Christian resignation to whatsoever might be her fate: and for some time Clarine thought that it was an early death to which Zoe thus resigned herself. But as they grew more intimate, Lady Octavian unbosomed herself completely to her new friend; and then Clarine comprehended that it was not to a sense of physical evils only to which Zoe was thus meekly bowing, but that it was likewise to the sorrow that was consuming her heart.

It will be necessary to afford the reader some idea of the internal arrangements of the Chateau. We have already said that it was a large straggling edifice; but all its parts were connected in some way or another. There was the main building—there were wings, communicated with by means of corridors: beyond these there were other buildings, which were reached by open passages, or rather colonnades. It was a mansion capacious enough for the accommodation of a large family, with forty or fifty servants. The reader may thence judge how the few inmates it now contained, would have been lost as it were if scattered about the edifice: but to prevent this extreme loneliness, all the rooms that were occupied were as much in assemblage as possible. The main body of the building had three storeys in addition to the ground-floor. The dining and breakfast rooms, as well as M. Volney's study, were on the ground-floor—the drawing-room and all the principal bedrooms on the first-floor—the servant's chambers on the second-floor; and the third or highest was totally unoccupied. Passages ran the entire length of the main building, on each of these floors: the principal staircase—the only one used by the present inmates—was in the middle of the building; but at each end there were smaller staircases, at the bottom of which were doors communicating with the corridors that led into the wings. The bedchambers occupied by Clarine Volney and Lady Octavian Meredith, were, as already stated, on the first or drawing-room floor; and their windows looked on the garden at the back of the house. These chambers did not join each other: they were separated by an oratory, or small chapel, the appointments of which had become much dilapidated through neglect. There was an organ in this oratory; and Clarine one day informed Zoe that she had endeavoured to play it, but it was completely out of order. There was however a good piano as well as a harp in the drawing-room: for when M. Volney purchased his furniture, he had not forgotten that Clarine had an exquisite taste for music;—and now, as Zoe was likewise gifted in that respect, the two ladies were enabled to play in concert.

Lady Octavian Meredith had already been several weeks at the Chateau before a syllable reached her ears to the effect that it was reputed to be haunted: and then its evil fame in this respect reached her knowledge from the circumstances that we must record in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER C.

THE LEGEND.

One evening, in the early part of September, the ladies had been practising music together until about ten o'clock,—when Clarine, complaining of a very severe headache, said that she should at once retire to her own chamber. She bade her friend good night: she next repaired to her father's study, where she imprinted the usual caress upon his cold pale cheek,—receiving from his lips no kiss in return: and she then withdrew.

had perpetrated towards her; and she was resolved on vengeance. Amy was naturally one of those dispositions that, coldly implacable when once a determination of this sort was settled, exhibited no feverish impatience to carry it out until opportunity served. She would bide her time—and therefore her's was a character all the more dangerous, and the revenge she contemplated was all the more certain to be sooner or later wreaked.

But it was not the sense of her wrongs which solely engaged her thoughts: she had to deplore the fall of a sister more beauteous than even she herself was, and whom she had loved as tenderly as her cold disposition would permit her to love at all. She had in the morning of that day received a letter from her sister; and the contents thereof entertwined themselves with the reflections that she was pursuing in regard to her own position.

The farmer's widow was no relation to Amy Sutton: but they had become acquainted by some means which it is not worth while pausing to describe; and when Amy had found that the time was approaching when she could no longer be able to conceal her position from the world, she bethought herself of Mrs. Willis as a woman in whom she could confide, and of her rural habitation as a place where she might bring forth in seclusion the offspring of her shame and dishonour. For in such a light does society regard the illegitimately born; although the mother may have been guiltless of wanton frailty, and merely the victim of foulest treachery—as was the case with poor Amy Sutton.

It was in the afternoon, as we have said, that she was sitting in the little parlour at the cottage when her ear caught the sound of footsteps approaching through the garden; and raising her eyes, she beheld Christian Ashton. Her first impulse was to order the servant-girl to deny her to the young gentleman: for be it recollected that when they were travelling together, she had not revealed to him the full extent of the misery entailed upon her by the Duke of Marchmont's black criminality. But a second thought determined her to see him. He was already acquainted with nearly every thing that regarded her;—and of what avail to keep back the rest? Besides, in her solitude she could welcome him as an old acquaintance—almost as a friend: she knew him to be a youth of the strictest probity and honour; and there is no sorrow so desperate but that it may derive a balm, however slight and however evanescent in its effect, from friendly companionship.

Christian was accordingly introduced; and with that air of frank kindness which was natural to him, he proffered his hand,—saying, "I would not pass by this neighbourhood, Amy, without seeing you—although my time is not completely my own."

The unfortunate young woman had instinctively risen on the entrance of one whom she regarded as a superior; and then her condition was at once revealed to his view. His sense of delicacy as well as his generosity however prevented him from betraying that he noticed the circumstance; and in the same considerate mood he at once glided into discourse upon the current topics of the day. He was almost sorry that he had intruded upon the young woman's privacy, painfully situated as she was: but he had presented himself there with a kind motive—for the tale she had told him in the railway carriage had enlisted his sympathy on her behalf.

"You can no longer be ignorant, Mr. Ashton," Amy at length said, while her countenance was suffused with the glow of mingled shame and indignation, "of the reason which led me into this seclusion. I am unhappy—so unhappy, Mr. Ashton, that were it not for the sake of revenge I should not cling to life. But, Oh, revenge will be so sweet!—and deadly indeed shall its nature be when the proper time for wreaking it arrives!"

"Great though your wrongs have been, Amy," said Christian, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "think you that you do well thus to keep your mind in a state of incessant excitement by brooding over this hoped-for vengeance?"

"It has become to me the sustaining food of existence," answered the unfortunate young woman; "and if I perish on the scaffold I will have the life of that man! Unless indeed it be possible to wreak some vengeance which he may live to feel——"

"For heaven's sake, Amy, speak not in this dreadful manner!" exclaimed Christian. "To talk of taking the life of the Duke of Marchmont, displays a frightful recklessness in respect to your own life."

"And what have I to live for?" demanded the young woman, with even a fierce sternness. "Not for the child that will be the offspring of mingled outrage and shame! No," she added bitterly: "I loathe and abhor it even before it is born!"

"You will think differently," said our young hero, "when the babe nestles in your bosom."

"As soon place a viper there!" ejaculated Amy Sutton. "But I was about to tell you that I *have* nothing, and *can* have nothing—save my present hope of vengeance—which binds me to life. When that is accomplished, I shall be ready to die—or in the accomplishment of it I may engulf myself!"

"But have you no relatives," asked Christian, infinitely pained as well as shocked by the language that flowed from the lips of the unfortunate young woman,—"have you no relatives who could be kind to you now, and who would have to deplore your fate if by your own madness——"

"I have one relative whom I loved—yes, still love," responded Amy, in a mournful tone,—"a very near one—a sister: but she is likewise fallen!"

"By treachery also?" asked Christian.

"No—by her own wantonness and weakness," rejoined Amy. "I will tell you a brief narrative. We two sisters were left orphans at a somewhat early age: an aunt took charge of Marion—another aunt took charge of me. The aunt who adopted Marion was the richer of the two relatives; and she gave Marion an education fitting her for the position of a lady. The aunt who took charge of me, brought me up to a genteel servitude—namely, the position of a lady's-maid. This aunt died when I was between fifteen and sixteen: I went into service—and have ever since earned my bread by mine own honest industry. My aunt taught me thrift—and I have been thrifty: or else I should not now possess the means of retiring awhile from the world—for not one single coin of the gold that the villain M[illegible]

mont offered as a recompense for his foul treachery, did I accept! But I was about to speak of Marion. It would be difficult to conceive a more lovely creature: she is indeed exquisitely beautiful—and her beauty has proved her ruin. Two years ago the aunt who had adopted her, died suddenly; and the property which she intended Marion to inherit, was swept away into the possession of strangers, through some informality in the will of the deceased. I recommended Marion to obtain a situation as a governess—for which her accomplishments fitted her. She went into a family in that capacity; but in a short time she became the victim of a seducer. This was the Earl of Beltinge; and with him she lived until very recently. I thought all the while—or at least until some weeks back—that she was still in her position as a governess: for her letters gave me an assurance to that effect. On leaving the service of the Duchess of Marchmont, I went to see my sister: but instead of finding her living as a preceptress in a respectable family, I found her luxuriating in the gilded infamy which at once proclaimed itself to my comprehension. Then, in the agony of my mind, I revealed everything which related to myself—told her how I had likewise fallen, though heaven knows through no fault of mine!—and told her likewise who was the author of my ruin. Then I came hither."

Amy ceased suddenly; and Christian, much pained by the narrative which he had just heard, said in a gentle voice, "I fear from the manner in which you broke off, that you have nothing to add in respect to penitence and reformation on the part of your erring sister?"

"Alas, nothing!" responded Amy Sutton. "So far from seeking to turn into a better path, Marion has taken a downward step in the career which she is pursuing. The Earl of Beltinge discovered that she was faithless to him; and in a moment he discarded her. Yes—mercilessly, though perhaps his severity was justifiable enough, he turned her adrift into the streets,—stripping her of every valuable and costly gem with which he had presented her during the time she was under his protection. What resource had she? The unfortunate girl found her way to a house of fashionable infamy, which is not altogether—at least in one sense—unknown to you."

"To me?" ejaculated Christian, in the most unfeigned astonishment: and then with a look of indignation, he said, "I can assure you, Miss Sutton——"

"I did not mean to offend nor to insult you," responded the young woman. "The fashionable house of infamy to which I allude, is that same Madame Angelique's——"

"Ah, I comprehend!" cried Christian,—"the place where those dresses were made, the diabolical use of which so nearly proved fatal to the character of the Duchess of Marchmont!"

"The same," Amy replied: "for the avocation of a dressmaker has been for years carried on by Madame Angelique, as a blind for the loathsome traffic which she pursues behind the scenes."

"And yet the Duchess herself patronized her at one time," observed our hero.

"Yes—but in total ignorance of the real character of that house," rejoined Amy; "and in the same manner Madame Angelique has had many lady customers who knew not the vile nature of the woman whom they thus patronized. But as I was telling you, Marion betook herself to that abode of fashionable infamy,—where she dwelt for a short time. There she occasionally met Marchmont; and he, little suspecting that she was my sister, made overtures, which of course she invariably rejected. She left that house the day before yesterday. I have received a letter from her this morning: she tells me that she is now under the protection of a man whose name was at once familiar to me, and will be familiar enough to you. I mean Wilson Stanhope."

"The villain!" ejaculated Christian. "I have more reasons than one for loathing and abhorring that unprincipled man! He grossly insulted my sister—he lent himself, as you are aware, to the iniquitous designs of the Duke of Marchmont—and he insulted one likewise," added our hero, thinking of his well-beloved Isabella, "who is as dear to me as that affectionate and cherished sister to whom I have just alluded."

"Yes: Marion," continued Amy, "is now under the protection of that man; and singular enough is it that through the Duke of Marchmont's agency this change in her circumstances has been brought about. I am as yet unacquainted with all the particulars: Marion had not time to describe them yesterday—she will write to me again to-day—and to-morrow I shall know all."

"But is it possible," exclaimed Christian, shocked at the impression which Amy's statement had just left upon his mind, "that your sister can accept boons at the hands of him who has done such foul wrong unto yourself?"

Amy Sutton did not immediately answer our hero's question: but she looked at him hard in the face with a peculiar expression—and then said, "The unfortunate Marion is not so deeply depraved, nor so lost to every good feeling, that she is indifferent enough to her sister's wrongs as to accept favours from the author of them. No, Mr. Ashton! She will succour me in the pursuance of my revenge, if opportunity may serve; and from something which she hints in her letter, there is a chance that her services may prove thus available. But, Oh! if Marion could but be reclaimed——it is this that dwells in my mind! And now, after all I have told you of the degradation of my sister, and with your knowledge of my own shame and dishonour, I ask what have I worth living for—unless it be for revenge—and wherefore should I continue to cling to life when once that revenge is accomplished?"

Christian endeavoured to reason with the young woman in a proper manner: but she was deaf to all his remonstrances—her mind was evidently settled upon the wreaking a deadly vengeance of some sort against the Duke of Marchmont; and our hero saw with pain and sorrow that no friendly argument could divert her from her course. He therefore at length rose to depart.

"I have not as yet explained," he said, "the precise motive of my visit; and from something which you yourself let drop, it may be unnecessary to make the offer which I had originally intended. Judging from all you told me in the railway-carriage some weeks back, I fancied that you purposed to retire into some seclusion here

would be irremediably ruined. I therefore feigned unconsciousness; and the terrible energy which inspired my soul, enabled me to play my part without exciting a suspicion in the breast of either Octavian or Christina. And then I received the most unmistakeable evidences of Christina's affectionate and devoted friendship, as well as of the deep compassionating regard which my husband entertained for me. A dangerous illness followed: for many days I was insensible: there was indeed no dissimulation there! And all that while Christina attended upon me as if she were my sister: she would not quit my chamber; and from the physician's lips did I subsequently receive the assurance that to the amiable and devoted Christina I owed my life. So soon as I approached convalescence, Christina intimated her intention to leave me. Full well did I comprehend the generous and noble-hearted girl's motive in adopting this course. I saw that her heart had not remained insensible to the personal appearance, the elegant manners, and captivating address of my husband Octavian—but that her own innate sense of propriety, as well as her friendship for me, had thus determined her in quitting a home which under other circumstances would have been such a happy one!"

Here Zoe paused for a few moments, and effectually struggled to keep back the tears which had flowed up almost to the brims of her eyes from the very fountains of her heart. She then continued in the following manner:—

"Some weeks passed after Christina left me; and I began to think that we ought not to remain altogether asunder: for I loved her as a sister—and I knew that she loved me with an equal depth of affection. Besides, she had saved my life; and I was incapable of ingratitude. I was also anxious to prevent her from suspecting that I had comprehended the motives which had induced her to leave me: for I had struggled hard at the time to veil what was passing in my own bosom. I resolved to see her; and taking advantage of an opportunity when I fancied that Lord Octavian would be absent on a visit to his father, I wrote to Christina, requesting her to come to me. She did so; and I saw how deeply she was affected on perceiving that my health was far from being restored. Something occurred to take Octavian's father suddenly and unexpectedly out of town: he could not therefore pay the intended visit—and he returned home. He found Christina there. As plainly as you, Clarine, can read the print of a book, could I read all that passed in the minds of Octavian and Christina—and how especially painful the ordeal was for that amiable and excellent girl. Heaven knows, too, it was painful enough for me!—and often and often have I since wondered how I had the presence of mind sufficient to go through it, and how I could maintain the fortitude of a calm composure. I saw that Christina would give worlds for an excuse to depart—but that she dared not devise such a pretext for fear lest it should excite a suspicion in my own mind. On the other hand, with an equal yearning, did I long to afford her that pretext: but on my own side I dared not, for fear lest both herself and Octavian should perceive that I had fathomed the secret of their souls. At length the moment came for Christina to take her departure; and I did not ask her to return. No—I was deeply, deeply annoyed with myself for having invited her thither on that occasion,—an occasion so replete with painful sensations for us all!"

Zoe again paused—but only for a few moments; and then she resumed her affecting narrative in the ensuing terms:—

"Several weeks again passed away, during which I had to sustain an incessant conflict with my own feelings. I could not help studying every look, word, and action on Octavian's part, in order to judge of the depth of his passion for Christina. I saw that he was most cruelly balanced between a sense of his duty towards myself and his love for Christina. I knew that he regarded me with a compassionate friendship, and that he strove hard to invoke the sentiment of gratitude to his aid: for it was through me that he had become enriched. At length I could endure that painful state of things no longer. Some women would have made it a subject of reproach to a husband that he dared to love another: but I was at least spared that injustice and that folly; for my common sense told me that Octavian had no power over his volition, and that he could not control the susceptibilities of his heart. Other women would have abandoned themselves to a frantic outburst of grief, and would have implored their husbands to give them back the love to which they had a right. But again did my good sense intervene to save me from that folly; for I knew—alas, too well!—that where true love never existed, it could not be conceded to even the most tearful and imploring entreaties. Some women, too, might have given way to upbraidings and reproaches: but I was incapable of such foul injustice. I knew it was not Octavian's fault that he had learnt to love Christina:—as well might it have been made a reproach to me that I had loved Octavian! No—none of those resources would I bend to! It was my continuous study to avoid enhancing the painfulness of my husband's feelings, or to suffer him to perceive that I fathomed and comprehended them all. But what was I to do? To lead such an existence was impossible: it was killing myself by inches—it was suffering Octavian to perish also by slow suicidal degrees. We were converting our own hearts into instruments of self-destruction: our feelings were becoming a slow poison for each. And then too I was continuously haunted by the conviction that Octavian was straining every nerve to keep the veil drawn down darkly over his own thoughts, and to lull me into the belief that he loved me. On the other hand I dared not reject his caresses, nor look cold upon his assiduities, for fear lest he should perceive that I knew how forced, how unnatural, and how strained they all were!"

"It was indeed," said Clarine, in a soft sympathizing voice, "a fearful existence to lead."

"You cannot wonder therefore, my dear friend," resumed Zoe, "that I at length made up my mind to leave England. The state of my health did, alas! afford too ready a pretext; and the physicians agreed that my only chance of eventual recovery was by removal to a southern clime. On the eve of my intended departure I sent for Christina that I might bid her farewell. She came; and unmistakeable were the proofs of friendship—nay, more, of sisterly love, which the amiable girl

gave me. We were alone together in the drawing-room; and on this occasion I apprehended not the speedy return of Lord Octavian. I had some little gift to present to Christina—a testimonial of my affectionate regard; and leaving the room, I ascended to my own chamber to procure it. On returning I heard voices in the drawing-room: they were those of my husband and Christina. I was riveted to the spot: I became a listener. It was a wild impassioned scene that was taking place. Octavian was half mad. He had seen that I had penetrated his secret—he comprehended the reasons which were urging my departure from England: he spoke vehemently and frantically of my self-martyrdom. On the other hand the conduct of Christina was admirable: it was full of deepest pathos and true maiden dignity: there was in it a world of generous feeling on my account, together with the unmistakeable assertion of her own virtuous principles and innate sense of rectitude. She rebuked Octavian when he dared speak of his love for her: she told him what his duty was towards myself. She urged him to accompany me to the Continent. But I will not dwell upon the scene: I cannot—my heart melts within me at the bare recollection. When I knew that it was drawing to a close, I sped up to my own chamber; and heaven alone can tell what preternatural fortitude was conceded to me to enable me to assume an air of calm composure—or at least of tranquil resignation—when Christina glided into my presence. Methinks that the amiable girl herself fancied I must have overheard what had just passed—or at least that I did indeed suspect the love which Octavian bore for her. Her deprecating looks seemed to ask my pardon that she should be, although so innocent, the cause of my unhappiness. But no word escaped the lips of either of us to give unmistakeable expression to what we knew, or thought, or felt, or apprehended. Our farewells were exchanged amidst tears and lamentations at being thus severed; and Christina disappeared from my presence. Then I came abroad."

Here Zoe suddenly ceased; and Clarine, taking her hand, pressed it affectionately. She perceived two tears tracing their pearly path down Zoe's cheeks: the kind-hearted French lady gazed with tenderest sympathy upon her English friend; and the latter, suddenly wiping away those tears, started up, saying, "Come, Clarine—let us return to the Chateau."

They walked on in silence for some minutes,—both engaged in their reflections: for Clarine herself was now deeply pre-occupied. At length awakening from her own reverie, she said, "You have told me your sad tale, dear Zoe, more completely than you had previously revealed it: but still you have not extended your confidence far enough to make me aware how you expect all this to end. Your health is improving—the colour is returning to your cheeks—you may have yet perhaps a long life before you—and you cannot remain for ever afar from your native land, separated from your parent, and dwelling in the seclusion of this old Chateau."

"Alas! my dear friend," responded Zoe, with a look and tone most pathetically sweet and full of an angelic resignation, "this colour which you behold upon my cheeks, deceives you, but does not deceive myself. I feel within me the germs of dissolution—the seeds of decay. Consumption is busy at my vitals: it has already planted its fatal sign upon my cheeks."

"Good heavens, speak not thus!" exclaimed Clarine, the tears gushing from her eyes. "It is distressing to a degree to hear one so young and so beautiful as you thus talk as if death were already looking you in the face!"

"And yet it is so," rejoined Zoe, with a soft, sweet smile. "You perceive, Clarine, that I do not attempt to delude myself. When I was journeying to the south of France, I thought that I should like to find some seclusion, where, with only one friend, I might pass the remainder of my days:—and I have found it. I cling not to life. No—the approach of death will be welcomed by me. In the grave my own sorrows will cease; and the tomb will engulph the only obstacle to the alliance of Octavian with the object of his love. Yes—death will be welcome! You may wonder how—conscious as I am that the elements of dissolution are actively at work within me—I should seem desirous of prolonging my existence by seeking this genial clime of Southern France: you may marvel likewise why—anxious as I am to advance and meet death half way—I did not rather settle myself in some congenial northern atmosphere. But that would be suicidal; and it is a crime for mortals to do aught knowingly to abridge the life which God has given. I no more dare be guilty of such wickedness than I dare leap down a precipice. If my head be giddy and I know that by walking on the edge of an abyss I should fall in, and in its profundities find that death which will be so welcome—it nevertheless is my duty to avoid the brim of the fatal gulf. Now you comprehend, Clarine, wherefore, though welcoming death, I may seem to cling to life—and wherefore, while knowing that the germs of disease are expanding fatally within me, I may appear to be seeking health in this salubrious Pyrenean region."

Zoe spoke with a most touching pathos, and yet without studying thus to invest her language with so deep an interest. Clarine listened with a heart full of emotions: but she made no reply. What could she say? All of a sudden Lady Octavian Meredith appeared to rally her spirits; and she said in even a cheerful tone, "It is some time since we went into the village: let us go thither—it will be a change of scene—and besides, I have some few purchases to make."

To the village the ladies accordingly repaired; and on entering it, the first object that struck them was a new shop which had just been opened for the sale of musical instruments. It was really a very handsome establishment for a small village: but then, as we have already hinted, there were several good houses and genteel families in the neighbourhood. The shop furnished a fine display of pianos; and one especially attracted the notice of Clarine. A card, which labelled it, indicated its price; and likewise by a few descriptive words showed that it was a much finer instrument than the one which she possessed at the old Chateau.

"If my father were rich," said Clarine, "I should ask him to purchase this beautiful instrument for me: for it has really put me quite out of conceit with my own piano."

It was merely in a careless conversational way

that Clarine thus spoke,—just as young and inexperienced minds are wont to give expression to any passing whim or phantasy. Zoe at once secretly resolved to purchase the piano for her friend, and to avail herself of the first opportunity to come alone to the village for this purpose. But as they turned away from the shop-window, they perceived M. Volney standing behind them. His countenance was coldly calm and melancholy as usual: he did not appear to have the intention of taking his daughter and Zoe by surprise; nor did he seem to notice the sudden start which was given by both—especially by Clarine—as they thus found themselves face to face with him.

"If you wish for that piano, Clarine," said M. Volney, in his wonted glacial monotony of tone, "you shall have it."

Then, without another word, he entered the shop—looked at the card labelling the piano, to ascertain its price—and bade the tradesman send the instrument at his earliest leisure to the Chateau, where the amount should be promptly paid. The arrangement was concluded in half-a-dozen words: there was no haggling on M. Volney's part—he asked not the tradesman to abate a single franc of the price marked upon the card; and when the matter was settled, M. Volney lifted his hat to Zoe, and passed on his way.

CHAPTER CI.

THE STUDY.

Clarine was perfectly astonished at her father's liberality. The sum he had just agreed to pay on her behalf, was a large one; and, as we have seen, she had previously fancied it to be totally incompatible with his means. She could not rightly comprehend whether he were stretching a point in a pecuniary sense for the purpose of affording her pleasure—or whether he were in reality better off than she had hitherto supposed him. She expressed herself in this uncertain manner to Lady Octavian Meredith, as they slowly retraced their way from the village to the Chateau.

"Your father," said Zoe, "has just done you a great kindness in his own peculiar way. He used as few words as possible; but I have no doubt that in his heart he was rejoiced at being enabled to afford you pleasure."

"My father is always kind to me," answered Clarine, who sincerely believed what she was saying; "and I am convinced that he loves me dearly. I do not remember for years past that he has spoken a harsh word to me."

"Has your mother long been dead?" inquired Lady Octavian Meredith.

"Ever since I was a child," responded Clarine; "and I have no recollection of her. I think that my father must have loved her very, very dearly; because he cannot bear to speak of her. I remember that when I was a girl I used sometimes to ask him about my mother: but he invariably besought me not to mention her name. And then, too, I recollect he would turn aside abruptly, and would press his hand to his brow and seem deeply affected. Of late years I have never alluded to my departed mother: for I have been afraid of giving my father pain. You see that he is afflicted with some secret care—I do not think it is through the loss of property, as some persons have supposed——"

"Your father, then, has been richer than he now is?" said Lady Octavian inquiringly.

"We used to live at a beautiful country-seat in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau," answered Clarine. "It was not large, nor was the annexed estate spacious: but the house was commodious, and very handsomely furnished in a somewhat antique style. We had eight or nine servants—for my father kept his carriage then: but still we saw very little company—my father never was fond of mingling with society—at least not within my recollection. He was always accustomed to be much alone, and to shut himself up for hours together in his own apartment. I remember too that he always had the habit of taking his long solitary walks as he does now. These circumstances make me think that it cannot be the loss of property which is preying upon his mind—because he was the same at our beautiful abode near Fontainebleau as he has been ever since we have dwelt in this Chateau."

"How was it that M. Volney lost his property?" asked Zoe.

"I am not even sure that he lost it at all," replied Clarine; "I only surmise so. It was a little more than five years ago that he one day told me we were going to remove to some other place; and on the very same day a post-chaise bore us off from that beautiful country-seat. Of all the servants old Marguerite alone accompanied us."

"And was the house shut up?" asked Lady Octavian.

"I do not know," responded Clarine. "We left it just as it was, with all the other servants in it: but whether my father, previous to our departure, made any arrangement in respect to the house and the domestics, I am unable to say. He has never spoken on the subject; and old Marguerite is really ignorant upon the point—or else she has always pretended to be. She nursed me in my infancy; and to a certain extent supplied the place of the mother whom I lost. This is why I love and revere her; and this is also the reason why, when my father is not present, she allows herself to address me in terms of endearing familiarity."

"And from that beautiful country-seat you came direct to this Chateau?" said Lady Octavian interrogatively.

"Yes: but I am convinced that when we left that country-seat my father had no fixed idea where he was about to settle his future abode. It was not his intention to remain in the village—nor near it. According to the few words he let fall upon the subject at the time, I have reason to believe that he thought of passing into Spain. It was only after an accidental visit to the Chateau during one of his rambles, that he suddenly took it into his head to settle himself there. You see, my dear Zoe, I have no reason for believing that my father lost any of his property beyond the simple fact of his abandoning such a beautiful residence in order to shut himself up in this old place."

"Perhaps, after all," suggested Lady Octavian, "M. Volney is as rich as ever he was; but inas-

much as seclusion suits the temper of his mind far better than even the limited society which you appear to have had in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau, he has chosen to bury himself in the Cheateau?"

"It may be so," answered Clarine: "but my father never speaks to me of his affairs—and I never ask him any questions. You see he never receives any visitors except the worthy old priest; and I believe that I should not have enjoyed the happiness of your society, my dear Zoe, unless it were that my father had one day bethought himself I might possibly find my mode of existence monotonously dull."

"Yes, indeed," observed Zoe, rather in a musing manner than speaking expressly to be overheard by Clarine; "it does seem hard to debar you from all society!"

"Oh, I require none!" exclaimed Clarine hastily, —"none more than I now possess! I can assure you I do not!" she added with a degree of earnestness which appeared unnecessary for the enforcement of the simple assurance which she thus gave.

They now reached the Chateau; and after a temporary separation to their respective chambers, in order to put off their walking apparel, they met in the drawing-room. About an hour afterwards a cart drew up to the front of the Chateau; Clarine, running to the window, perceived that it contained the newly purchased piano. It was brought up into the drawing-room,—the tradesman himself having accompanied it in order to see that it was properly taken care of by his men. When he had superintended all that was necessary, he presented his bill according to the intimation given him by M. Volney.

M. Volney was in his study; and thither Clarine sped with the bill in her hand. She entered, and presented it to her father. He took it—flung

a single glance at the amount specified—and rising from his seat, opened an iron safe. Taking thence a large tin box, he unlocked it; and Clarine perceived that one compartment was full of gold and another of bank-notes. M. Volney took out a roll of those notes to select a coup'e for a thousand francs (or forty pounds) each; and Clarine, who was watching him with mingled curiosity and surprise, was enabled to observe even at a glance and at the roughest calculation that the tin box contained an enormous sum of money. As M. Volney looked up to give her the notes which he had selected, he perceived the wonder and surprise expressed in her features; and for a moment a cloud passed over his countenance. But the next instant it was gone; and he said, in a voice of unusual kindness, and even with a faint smile upon his lips, "You did not perhaps know that I possessed such ample resources. It may be that I have shown you too little confidence——However," he added, suddenly checking himself, "it is as well this opportunity should have occurred for me to say that all that I have is your's: and if anything should suddenly happen to me, you will know where to find that which will maintain you in comfort—aye, in affluence for the whole of your life."

"Good heavens, my dear father!" exclaimed Clarine, the tears gushing from her eyes: "do not speak on such subjects!—it seems as if I were about to lose you!"

"Remember, Clarine," answered M. Volney, with an increasing mildness of tone, "I am advanced in years; and according to the course of nature—even setting apart those casualties from accident or sickness to which we are all liable ——But do not weep—do not weep! I thought I had just now done something to afford you pleasure. Poor girl! you have not known much of happiness lately—and I would not now throw a damp upon that satisfaction which I hoped to afford you."

"I am glad, dear father," replied Clarine, smiling through her tears, and then quickly brushing them away, "that you now give me an opportunity of expressing my gratitude for your goodness in respect to the piano."

Thus speaking, Clarine took her father's hand and pressed it to her lips. He gazed upon her with a singularly melancholy expression for a few moments: then it seemed as if a sudden access of rage, fierce and bitter, swept over his countenance: but in a moment this in its turn vanished;—and smoothing down the glossy hair of the amazed and half-affrighted Clarine, M. Volney said in a tone full of emotion, "Poor girl, if I thought that I had the right——"

But he suddenly stopped short, and as abruptly turned away—yet not so quickly as to prevent Clarine from catching the look of inexpressible anguish which seized upon his features. The young lady could have shrieked out—there was something so fearful in that look: but she subdued her emotion sufficiently to avoid giving such vent to it. She longed to approach her sire—to ask him what he meant, and what dire woe was afflicting him: but she dared not! And now for the first time Clarine's eyes were open to the fact that she had been all along totally excluded from her father's confidence in every matter in which a daughter might legitimately enjoy it.

"Clarine," said M. Volney, again turning towards her, and speaking with his habitual cold kindness of tone, if the reader can understand the phrase,—"forget what has just passed—forget the unfinished sentence which came from my lips. But you cannot understand it——and you never, *never* shall! As for this dross," he said, glancing with glacial contempt towards the treasure in the large tin box, "do not gossip about having seen it: we live in a secluded place, and it were as well not to suffer whispers to get abroad that may tempt desperate men to a lawless act. And now go, Clarine——forget, I say, what has passed—and be happy, my dear girl—be happy with your new piano. Henceforth in other things, as in this trifling one, will I study your happiness more than I have hitherto done."

M. Volney pressed his lips for a moment to his daughter's forehead—and then gently pushed her from the room. She sped to her own chamber, where she remained for a few minutes to tranquillize her thoughts and compose her feelings, before she returned to the drawing-room—for she did not wish to be questioned by Lady Octavian Meredith: her father had enjoined her to forget what had just passed—and though it were impossible to do this, yet at least she resolved to consider it as sacred. She had suddenly discovered that so far from her sire having lost his property, he was immensely rich; and more than ever, therefore, did she marvel why he should have left his own beautiful mansion and pleasant little estate in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau to bury himself in that gloomy old Chateau on the outskirt of the Pyrenees. Other things likewise entered into the midst of Clarine's thoughts: but with these we have nothing to do—at least for the present.

Having sufficiently composed her countenance, the young lady returned to the drawing-room, where the piano-seller had just finished putting the instrument into proper tune. His account was paid, and he took his departure. Zoe and Clarine now took their turns to try the new purchase; and they were enraptured with it. It was truly a splendid instrument; and they both brought out its fine tones with the grandest effect. They practised together for the greater portion of the rest of that day: but amidst the joy which Clarine experinced in possessing the coveted piano, would come the recollection, saddening and sickening, of that look of indescribable anguish which had swept over her father's features during her singular interview with him in the study. That interview had in a few moments given Clarine's mind the experience of whole years: a veil seemed to have fallen from her eyes; and she was led to reflect upon things on which she had never reflected before. She now saw that there was some deep mystery connected with her parent,—a mystery for which not even the loss of a much-loved wife (as she supposed her mother to have been) could possibly account. Then, what was it? Clarine was bewildered: there seemed no earthly clue to the solution of that mystery;—and moreover it appeared to be her father's resolve that, whatever it were, the secret should die with him.

The ladies separated a little after ten o'clock in the evening, and sought their respective chambers. Zoe was on this occasion attended in her room by Rachel—for the maids took their turns to wait

upon their mistress; and Honor had tended her ladyship in the morning. A glance at Rachel's countenance showed Zoe that the girl was labouring under a sense of terror which she vainly endeavoured to conceal. At first Lady Octavian thought of leaving the circumstance unnoticed, in order to avoid a discourse upon superstitious matters: but she perceived that Rachel was trembling to such a degree that she felt it would only be an act of kindness to encourage and re-assure her.

"Rachel," her ladyship accordingly said, "that foolish girl Honor has been infecting you with her terrors. I sincerely hope you will not give way to such childish delusions——"

"Pardon me, my lady, if I seem frightened," interrupted Rachel: "but one cannot always control one's thoughts. I was sitting here all alone, waiting for your ladyship; and all kinds of disagreeable sensations began to creep over me. I looked towards the window, and thought I saw a ghastly pale face gazing in at me: so I went and closed the draperies. Then, as I looked towards the bed, I fancied that I saw that same face looking out from behind the curtains; and it was ever so long before I could muster up the courage to go and peep behind them and satisfy my mind there was no one there. Scarcely had I recovered from this alarm, when the door opened; and such a cold chill swept through me! for I thought I saw some one looking in at me! But again I mustered up my courage: I peeped out into the passage—and there was no one. That nasty door has got such a wretched lock, it opens of its own accord!"

"You have been giving way, my poor girl," said Zoe, "to the hallucinations of your frightened fancy. You must be more courageous. I can dispense with your services this evening: I intend to read a little before retiring to rest; and as you are nervous and uneasy, I will accompany you as far as the door of your own chamber. But you must not tell Honor that I did this—as it is for the first and last time, and henceforth I shall expect both of you to exhibit more courage."

Zoe did not really intend to sit up reading before she sought her couch: but with the kindest consideration she made this a pretext for seeing the terrified Rachel as far as her own chamber. The girl was exceedingly grateful to her mistress; for she was indeed labouring under a nervous trepidation and a sense of superstitious terror which she could not possibly shake off.

"We must tread lightly," said Zoe: "for I would not have it supposed by the other inmates of the Chateau that I possess maids so foolish as to be afraid to go to their own rooms by themselves."

It was with a tone and look of benignant remonstrance that Lady Octavian thus spoke. Taking a taper in her hand, she accompanied Rachel to the storey above, where the young woman and Honor jointly occupied the same chamber. Zoe then retraced her way down the staircase towards her own apartment,—on entering which she recollected that she had left her watch in the drawing-room, on account of having accidentally broken the particular chain she had worn that day. It was not altogether without a certain feeling of apprehension that Lady Octavian crossed the passage and re-entered the drawing-room. The circumstance of the preceding night, and the legend she had heard in the morning, had been vividly recalled to her memory by the spectacle of Rachel's fears. But Zoe did her best to throw off the feeling that was upon her—which was indeed repugnant to her own good sense—and of which she was all the more ashamed after the sort of remonstrating lesson she had a few minutes back been reading to Rachel.

Entering the drawing-room, Lady Octavian Meredith took the watch from the table where she had left it; and she then issued forth again. But scarcely had she crossed the threshold—scarcely had her foot touched the floor of the passage—when she nearly dropped the taper from her hand; and she could with difficulty express an ejaculation of terror on beholding a dimly defined shape gliding onward in the distance. She was suddenly transfixed to the spot with a cold terror: if she could have seen her countenance in the mirror at that instant, she would have been horrified at it, for it was pale as death. Her eyes followed the form with the natural keenness of her vision sharpened to the intensest degree. Whether it were fancy, or whether it were reality, she could not subsequently determine in her own mind: but it certainly seemed to her that the shape was that of a tall slender young man, dressed in dark garments, and that he was gliding onward with footsteps completely noiseless, raising not the faintest echo in that long passage where even the slightest sound was wont to reverberate!

The apparition—or whatever it were—was lost in the obscurity prevailing at the end of the passage. Zoe staggered across to her own chamber; and sinking into a large easy chair, felt as if consciousness were about to abandon her. But by one of those sudden and almost preternatural efforts which the human mind sometimes makes, she summoned up all her courage to her aid—and said to herself, "How foolish—how childish of me! It could have been nothing but fancy!"

And yet she could not persuade herself that it was so: the conviction was strong in her mind that she had seen *something*—but whether a spirit from the dead, or a living intruder, she could not tell. The superstitious fear which was still upon her, prevented her from altogether repudiating the former belief, on account of the gliding noiselessness with which the form had hurried onward. For an instant she was half inclined to seek Clarine's chamber and acquaint her with what had happened: but the next moment she felt ashamed of even allowing such an idea to enter her head. She retired to rest: but it was long before sleep visited her eyes;—and when slumber at length stole upon her, the whole dismal tragedy associated with the Chateau was re-enacted before her mental vision.

When Lady Octavian Meredith awoke in the morning she hastened to draw aside the window-draperies; and the bright September sun poured in so golden a flood of lustre that all her superstitious apprehensions were instantaneously dispelled—and she smiled at what she considered to have been her folly of the preceding evening. How glad she was *now* that she had not sought Mademoiselle Volney's chamber with the history of her idle fears!

"Yes," said Zoe to herself, "it was naught but the imagination! The discourse I held with Rachel—the circumstance of conducting the girl to her own chamber—and the vivid conjuring up of the legend I had heard in the morning,—these were the causes which operated upon my mind, enfeebled perhaps somewhat by care and indisposition. Yes—truly it was naught but fancy on my part!"

It was Rachel's turn to take the morning duty at the toilet of her mistress; and when the abigail entered the chamber, she found Zoe more cheerful than she had been for some time past: for such was the natural effect of a relief from superstitious terrors. Not another syllable was exchanged upon the subject; and Lady Octavian proceeded to the breakfast-parlour,—where she found Clarine, and where M. Volney speedily made his appearance. Zoe could not help thinking that there was a certain dejection in Clarine's looks—a certain despondency which she was endeavouring either to throw off or to conceal. Lady Octavian studied well the countenance and manner of her French friend—but without appearing to do so. She felt persuaded in her own mind that there was really something which hung like a weight upon Mademoiselle Volney's spirits; and now she asked herself whether Clarine could have also seen something to excite her superstitious terrors?

CHAPTER CII.

M. VOLNEY.

The weather was beautiful; and soon after breakfast the two ladies walked forth together. Zoe now perceived that Clarine was more pensive than even while at the breakfast-table—or at least that she struggled less arduously to veil it,—probably because she had been most anxious to conceal her feelings, whatsoever they were, from her father's observation.

"My dear Clarine," said Lady Octavian, at length, "there is something preying upon your mind?"

Clarine gave the sudden start of one who cherished a secret which had just been surprised—or rather the existence of which had just been detected, though the secret itself remained still locked up in her own bosom. She glanced with an air of anxiety towards Zoe—then bent down her looks—and said nothing: but tears gushed from her eyes.

"My dear friend," continued Lady Octavian in the kindest manner, "you yesterday assured me that if for my own sorrows a friendship could afford a balm, I possessed your's. It is now for me to reciprocate the assurance. See! here is the very bank on which we sat down yesterday when I gave you the complete narrative of my own causes of grief. Let it to-day become the scene of that confidence which you will repose in me? I will not so far insult myself, nor insult your own good feeling, Clarine, by saying more than simply to remark that it is from no motive of mere idle curiosity I speak."

"I know it, my dear friend—I know it!" murmured Clarine: and then from her lips escaped a gush of mental anguish which she could not possibly keep back.

Lady Octavian Meredith said whatsoever she could think of to console her friend: but ignorant as she was of the sources of Clarine's woe, it was difficult to shape her words in a form calculated to convey the solace she would fain impart.

"Yes—I will tell you what it is that thus afflicts me," at length said Clarine. "It was a tale I heard yesterday—last evening——"

"After we separated for the night?" inquired Zoe in surprise: "for until that hour, my dear Clarine, methought that you were in good spirits—and all the more so on account of your father's kindness in respect to the piano?"

"Ah! my poor father!" murmured Clarine, in a voice of the profoundest melancholy.

"Good heavens, what is it that you can have learnt?" exclaimed Zoe. "Was it some revelation which old Marguerite may have taken it into her head to make?"—for her ladyship could conceive no other source whence Clarine might have received any such revelation after the hour for retiring to rest.

"Yes—Marguerite—it was Marguerite!" said Clarine, hastily. "But I will tell you, my dear Zoe, what I have learnt! A veil has fallen from my eyes—and I have obtained an insight into the past which has most cruelly afflicted me!"

The young lady paused for a few moments: she was evidently struggling to compose her feelings as much as possible; and at length she addressed Zoe in the following manner:—

"My father in his former years was of a very different disposition from what he now appears to be. He was gay and sprightly—he loved society—though he never was dissipated nor irregular in his conduct. On the contrary, he ever bore the highest reputation for moral worth, honourable behaviour, and lofty feelings. He possessed a very dear friend of about his own age, and of a somewhat higher standing in society. This was the Viscount Delorme,—the bearer of an ancient title as well as the possessor of great wealth. They had been fellow-students together at college—they made the Continental tour together—and though no bonds of kinship united them, yet was it a more than friendship which held them together—it was a true fraternal love. The Viscount Delorme has been described to me as one of the handsomest as well as the most elegant and fascinating of men. He married a young and beautiful lady, who died in giving birth to a son. The Viscount was inconsolable for her loss: he shut himself up in his own chamber—my father was the only person whom he would see. His health suffered; and his physicians earnestly recommended that he should travel, in order that change of scene might have a salutary effect upon his spirits. My father offered to accompany him—and for this purpose to postpone the alliance which he was about to contract with the object of his own love. Such a circumstance may afford you, my dear Zoe, an idea of the strength of that friendship which my father experienced towards the Viscount—a friendship which would even have led him to sacrifice, for the time being, the consummation of his own fondest hopes. But the Viscount would not hear of it; and in order to escape from my father's well-meant importunities that he should accompany him, Delorme took his departure suddenly and stealthily, without leaving

a clue to the direction in which his contemplated journey lay. He however left behind him a letter for my father, promising that he would write so soon as his mind should have somewhat recovered from the effects of the terrible bereavement he had sustained. His infant son the Viscount had been consigned to the care of a distant female relative —a Marchioness of considerable wealth, and who resided in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau,— where, I should observe, the Viscount Delorme's country mansion was situated—as you already know that my father's likewise was. Shortly after the Viscount's departure my father espoused the object of his love—my mother."

Here Clarine became deeply affected, as if that allusion to her long departed mother had re-opened the fountains of her grief. But at length conquering her emotions, she continued her narrative in the ensuing manner:—

"The marriage of my father and mother took place about six-and-twenty years ago. At the expiration of a year a daughter was born,—who, if she had lived, would have been my elder sister: but she died a few months after her birth from one of those maladies which are peculiar to infancy. Eighteen months had elapsed without the slightest intelligence being received from the Viscount Delorme, either by my father, or the Marchioness who had the care of his child; and it was feared that he had died in some foreign land. But at length letters arrived to announce that he was still a denizen of this world—that he had travelled through many climes—and that he had resolved not to sadden the minds of his friends with the spectacle of his own deep sorrows until they were mellowed down to the healthier tone of resignation. Such was the mood, according to the letters, to which the Viscount had at length brought himself; and he concluded by announcing his speedy return to his domain near Fontainebleau. These letters were written from Italy: and about three months after their arrival in France, the Viscount himself reappeared at Fontainebleau. I need hardly say that he was cordially welcomed by my father, as well as by the Marchioness—or that he was delighted to observe how his beloved boy had thriven. He settled down once more at his own palatial mansion; and the Marchioness surrendered up the little Alfred to the parental protection. Time passed on: the mind of the Viscount appeared to have completely recovered from its shock; and even the mournfulness which had succeeded upon the phase of bitter affliction was yielding in its turn to happier influences. The friendship between my father and himself continued as warm as ever; and as you may easily suppose, the Viscount was a constant guest at the Volney mansion. After an interval of between three and four years since the birth of the first child, my elder sister—an interval which made my father apprehend that he was now destined to continue childless—I was born. Great was the joy of my parents as I have been informed; and though perhaps my father could have wished for an heir to his name, he was nevertheless filled with enthusiastic happiness when contemplating his infant daughter. And now, my dear Zoe, I am about to touch upon the saddest portion of my tale—that episode in last night's series of revelations which has filled me with so much grief!"

Clarine again paused for a few instants: the tears trickled from her eyes; and Lady Octavian spoke in the most soothing terms which her imagination could suggest. Mademoiselle Volney pressed her friend's hand affectionately—wiped away her tears—and pursued her narrative in the following terms:—

"I was scarcely a year old when a frightful suspicion suddenly seized upon my father. Oh, dearest Zoe! how can I continue?—how can I pursue a theme which sheds dishonour upon my mother's name—that mother whom I have ever thought of with love and reverence, although she perished ere her image could be imprinted upon my mind! It is a painful task which I have undertaken——and yet my soul yearns to make you the confidant of its sorrows! I will compose myself sufficiently to enable me to proceed. Yes —a frightful suspicion struck athwart my father's brain——and it was speedily confirmed! My mother had learnt to love the Viscount Delorme better than her own lawful husband. You understand me, Zoe?"

"Alas too well, dearest Clarine!" responded Lady Octavian, deeply affected. "But was there no possibility of error?—might not your father have mistaken some transient levity for an evidence of guilt?"

"Alas, no!" replied Clarine, in a voice full of the most melancholy pathos: "the evidence was irresistible—my father was dishonoured in his wife ——and oh, that wife was my mother! Can you conceive any treachery so dark—any perfidy so black, as that of which the Viscount Delorme was guilty? The explosion was terrific—and the Viscount fled to avoid the vengeance which my half-frenzied sire vowed to wreak upon him. As for my mother——"

"What became of her?" inquired Zoe in a half-hushed voice, as if fearing to put the question: for Clarine had suddenly stopped short—the tears were again trickling down her cheeks—and her bosom was heaving with the sobs that inwardly convulsed it.

"My mother," she said, in a tone that was scarcely audible—"my mother——alas! she received a shock from which she never recovered! Overwhelmed with the sense of her own degradation, and of the wreck which she had wrought with regard to a fond devoted husband's happiness —she died of a broken heart!"

There was another long pause; and then Clarine, after another outburst of grief, continued as follows:—

"The Viscount Delorme had not only proved himself a black traitor to the sacred ties of friendship, but also a coward. He had fled to avoid the duel to which my incensed father purposed to provoke him. Yes—he fled, leaving his child behind him; and thus the little Alfred became once more indebted to the kind care of the Marchioness. My father could not endure to remain at his own mansion—the scene where so much happiness had been so cruelly blighted! He set out for some other clime, taking me with him. Marguerite was my nurse. It was my father's intention to proceed to Italy—I know not whether with any settled purpose—or whether he fixed at random upon that transalpine country, all places in the world being equally the same to him in the desolated

condition of his heart. We traversed the Alps by easy stages; for at every halting-place it appears that my poor father went wandering out amidst those dangerous glacier-regions, and that sometimes his rambles were so protracted it was feared that he was lost. Marguerite well remembers that journey: she spoke of it last evening in vivid language. She recollects how we were nearly lost on the heights of Mount St. Bernard—and how the dogs of the Hospice were the instruments of our salvation. She likewise bears in mind how we tarried several days at that Hospice, and in what constant terror she was sustained by the protracted absences of my father amidst those glacier regions so sublime, so terrible! We passed on into Italy: but instead of tarrying there, as it first of all appeared to be my father's intention, he hurried on the journey to Leghorn: there we took ship for Marseilles; and from Marseilles we travelled straight back to the mansion near Fontainebleau. There my father settled down again, after an absence of about four months; and I was too young at the time to receive any lasting impressions of the journey. Never, my dear Zoe, until last night was I aware that these eyes of mine had gazed upon the Alps, or that I had ever passed beyond the frontier of France. I must observe that in consequence of the scandal excited by the Viscount Delorme's infamy in the neigbourhood of Fontainebleau, his respectable relative the Marchioness quitted her mansion, taking the boy Alfred with her; and she proceeded to another estate which she had in the western part of France. Years then passed away."

"Years passed away," said Zoe, mournfully and mechanically repeating Clarine's words; "and you, my sweet friend, were brought up in ignorance of all that had taken place?"

"Yes," responded the young lady,—"in total ignorance! Never was the veil lifted from my eyes until last night. Oh! I am no longer at a loss to comprehend wherefore my father was so impatient, or else so afflicted, whenever in the innocence of girlhood I spoke of my mother. Alas! what pangs must I have excited in his breast!—and heaven knows how unconsciously on my part! My heart weeps bitter tears as I think of it—and likewise because, my dear Zoe, it is shocking—— Oh! it is shocking to be unable to look back with respect and with veneration towards the memory of a mother! Yes—and I now comprehend likewise," continued Clarine, her voice sinking so low that it would have been inaudible were it not for the naturally harmonious clearness of its tones, — "I comprehend likewise what dreadful thought must sometimes be uppermost—perhaps *ever* uppermost in the mind of my father! Zoe, dearest friend," added the unhappy Clarine, with a strong convulsing shudder, and fixing haggard looks upon Lady Octavian's countenance, "I now comprehend — my God! I comprehend that he doubts whether I am his own child!"

With these words, Clarine threw herself upon Zoe's bosom and wept bitterly. Her own bosom was torn and rent with convulsing sobs:—for some minutes she appeared as if totally unsusceptible of solace. Zoe lavished sisterly caresses upon her—but she spoke no word: language itself were a mockery if seized upon as a resource to convey consolation under such circumstances. But there is no human anguish so profound that it does not expend itself: and thus was it at length with the grief of the unfortunate Clarine.

"Let me hasten, dear Zoe," she said, "to bring my unhappy narrative to a conclusion. But it is about to take a strange leap—and you will at first marvel how I am in a condition to tell you that which I am about to communicate. Nevertheless, it is the truth—it is no idle dream—no phantasy of the fevered imagination! I am about to speak of the Marchioness and of Delorme's son Alfred. Years passed away after the terrific explosion near Fontainebleau; and Alfred Delorme grew up under the affectionate care of his excellent relative. Meanwhile no tidings had been received from his father. The Marchioness had therefore long deemed the Viscount dead: but it was necessary that Alfred Delorme should reach his twenty-first year before legal proceedings could be taken to establish his claim to the title and estates of his father. It appears that at the very time he attained his majority, some report of a marvellous and singular nature relative to the late Viscount reached the ears of the Marchioness. It was a statement of such a kind that though it seemed scarcely credible, she was resolved to sift it to the very bottom. Though stricken in years—indeed bordering upon sixty—she resolved for Alfred's sake to take this step. I am now speaking of a date between six and seven years back. The Marchioness, in consequence of the intelligence to which I have just referred, resolved to undertake a journey into Switzerland. Alfred Delorme went with her. In due time they reached the Hospice of Mount St. Bernard: for *this* was their destination. There the Marchioness instituted the inquiries for which purpose she had dared a journey so perilous, and so trying for one of her years. The intelligence she had received in France was completely correct: the fate of the Viscount Delorme was cleared up—it ceased to be a mystery!"

"And that fate?" said Zoe, with a half-hushed voice of suspense: for she experienced the liveliest interest in the narrative to which she was listening.

"It appears," continued Clarine, "that when the Viscount Delorme fled from Fontainebleau in order to avoid my father's vengeance, he was attended by only one domestic—a faithful valet who had been for some time in his service. Having before been in Italy, the Viscount determined to return to that country. On arriving at the village of Martigny in the valley which is overlooked by the towering heights of Mount St. Bernard, the valet was taken dangerously ill; and whether it were through an ungrateful recklessness for the man's fidelity—or whether it were for any other reason, I cannot tell you: but certain it is that the Viscount Delorme left him there amidst strangers, bidding him follow on to Naples if he should happen to recover. The valet *did* recover after a long and painful illness; and he proceeded to Naples. But there he could hear no tidings of his master. He returned to France—repaired to Fontainebleau—thence to the estate to which the Marchioness had removed—but still without learning aught of the Viscount Delorme. He therefore engaged himself in the service of another family; and many years then passed away. At length—about seven years ago—this valet was in the ser-

rice of a family who proposed to visit Switzerland, and thence pass into Italy. A part of their plan was to cross Mount St. Bernard. They arrived in safety at the Hospice, where they were received with the welcome which the good monks of that Alpine asylum are accustomed to show to all travellers. There is a museum of curiosities at the Hospice, most of them being the sad memorials of the perished ones whose corpses have been at different times found amidst the snows of the mountains. These curiosities, memorials, and relics were displayed to the family with whom the valet was travelling; and he himself likewise saw them. Amongst them he recognised a peculiar ring, which had belonged to the Viscount Delorme. He questioned the monks on the subject; and it appeared, on reference to the catalogue, that this ring, together with other valuables, were found upon the corpse of a gentleman several years back. The corpse, though completely preserved at the time, nevertheless afforded indications of having been for a considerable period previous to its discovery—perhaps two or three years—embedded in the snow-drift where it was eventually found. There were no papers about the person of the unfortunate individual to show who he was: but he had several articles of jewellery and a considerable sum of money in his possession. It being impossible to establish his identity, the property thus found upon him was rendered available for the funds of the St. Bernard establishment, according to the laws of the Canton. For a long time the corpse was left exposed in the dead-house, in the hope that some passing traveller might chance to recognise it: for the dead are preserved for many years in a life-like state of freshness in that Alpine region. But at length the remains were interred; and as for the jewels, all had been converted into money with the exception of that one ring, which was kept as a means of affording some clue for accident to develope towards the identification of the deceased. It was this report which the valet, on his return to France, conveyed to the ears of the Marchioness; and it was in consequence thereof that she at once undertook that long and perilous journey, in company with Alfred Delorme, to ascertain for their own melancholy satisfaction the truth of the details which had thus reached them."

"How wildly singular is this tale!" said Zoe: "it is full of the marvel of romance. Well has the poet said that truth is stranger than fiction!"

"Yes—wild, and strange, and yet how mournful in every one of its phases," responded Clarine, with a profound sigh. "You may easily suppose, my dear Zoe, that when I heard this narrative last night, I listened to it with an interest so absorbing—with feelings so deeply moved——yes, and with emotions so conflicting, that I cannot describe them!" and Clarine shuddered as she spoke. "Again I say let me hasten and conclude this narrative of mine. The unfortunate Marchioness, on descending from Mount St. Bernard, was seized with illness at Martigny—that very village where years beforehand the valet had been abandoned by his master. There the poor lady died. Alfred Delorme, who had long been unto her as a son, tended her in her last illness—that illness which proved fatal; and he bore her remains to France, where he interred them in the family vault. He then proceeded to Fontainebleau:—and for what purpose, think you? It was to seek an interview with my father, to communicate to him the fate of his sire—that fate which had just been cleared up!—and likewise to implore on behalf of his deceased parent the forgiveness of my outraged father. Alas! I have too much reason to believe that my father was implacable; and that he swore not merely a continued hatred for the memory of the deceased, but likewise a hatred for that deceased's son. Alfred departed in sorrow at the failure of his truly Christian purpose; and it was shortly afterwards that my father quitted his mansion so suddenly, taking only Marguerite and myself with him—and travelling to the South of France, he settled himself in this Chateau, as I explained to you yesterday."

"And Marguerite told you all this last night?" said Zoe. "Then must she have been a complete confidante of your father: for your father alone could have revealed to her all that he learnt and all that took place on the occasion of that interview between himself and Alfred Delorme?"

"Marguerite told me all this last night," responded Clarine: and her countenance was buried in her kerchief as she thus spoke.

"I presume," continued Zoe, "that the young Viscount experienced no trouble in obtaining possession of his deceased father's estates, and of the title thereto pertaining?"

"He experienced no difficulty," answered Clarine.

"Perhaps," resumed Zoe, "your father so suddenly left his own house near Fontainebleau through the apprehension that the ancestral mansion of the Delormes might become the abode of the young Viscount, to whom he had sworn such hatred for his father's sake; and he could not endure the idea of dwelling in the same neighbourhood with one whose very name must ever remind him of his outraged friendship, his wrecked happiness, his dishonoured and perished wife?"

"Yes," responded Clarine: "doubtless that was the reason. But if it were so, it was left to my conjecture—for Marguerite specified it not last night as the motive for my father's conduct in leaving his home."

"And was it with M. Volney's consent," inquired Lady Octavian, "that Marguerite told you all these things last night?"

"Oh, no! no!" murmured Clarine, weeping bitterly, and half stifled with her convulsing sobs. "My father knows not that a syllable of all this has reached my ears! And it was but yesterday, Zoe, when I sought him in his own study for the payment of the piano, that he assured me I should never understand the mysteries which enveloped him. Alas! I am very, very unhappy——Oh, far more unhappy than you can possibly conceive! How can I hide from my father's knowledge my acquaintance with all these things? The ordeal I just now passed through at the breakfast-table, was terrible! I scarcely dared look my father in the face. Were he not so completely absorbed in the contemplation of his own sorrows—were he not ever looking inwardly, as it were, and seeing naught outwardly—he could not fail to perceive that there is now something fearful hanging over my soul!"

"My dear Clarine," said Zoe, "you must exert all your fortitude to retain your self-possession. It would add infinitely to your father's afflictions if he were to learn that Marguerite has betrayed his confidence—which she evidently has done. Surely, surely there must have been some strong motive for her to tell you all this?"

Clarine said nothing: but again she buried her countenance in her kerchief; and for several minutes appeared to be the prey of emotions which Lady Octavian Meredith considered as too profoundly sacred to be intruded upon by farther questioning.

CHAPTER CIII.

THE SOLEMN INJUNCTION.

THE ladies presently retraced their way towards the Chateau. Clarine had now become more calm: indeed she was evidently doing her best to compose her feelings and tranquillize her countenance, in case she should meet her father. Zoe considerately avoided a return to the topic of the previous conversation: for she understood full well wherefore Mademoiselle Volney was thus endeavouring to conquer her feelings—or at least to assume an outward serenity; and her amiable English friend would not willingly disturb her in that attempt. Zoe therefore discoursed upon general subjects, as they slowly wended their way back to the old Chateau: but Clarine only answered in a few words—sometimes in mere monosyllables:—she was deeply pre-occupied.

When the Chateau was reached, the ladies separated to their chambers for the purpose of putting off their walking-apparel; and Zoe had now more leisure to reflect upon all that she had so recently heard. It was indeed, as she herself had expressed it, a tale of wildest romance: and well—too well did it account for M. Volney's sombre moods, for his love of self-isolation, and for those long solitary walks which he was in the habit of taking, as if thereby courting opportunities to be as much alone as possible with his own thoughts. But there was one thing which bewildered Lady Octavian Meredith. She could not possibly conceive for what motive Marguerite had made such painful revelations to Clarine Volney. The old Frenchwoman had the air of a person possessed of generous feelings—her kindness towards Clarine had been the subject of the young lady's grateful eulogy: but Zoe could only regard that lifting of the veil from the mysteries of the past as a most unnecessary piece of cruelty on old Marguerite's side. Wherefore so rudely awaken a daughter from a dream in which she had taught herself to love and respect her mother's memory?—wherefore breathe in her ears the tale of that mother's guilt?—wherefore disenchant her of the vision which had so innocently and in such sweet filial confidence delineated a halo as encircling a mother's name?—and why (oh, cruellest detail of all!)—why plunge a dagger so deeply into Clarine's heart by the hideous intelligence that he whom she had looked upon as her father, entertained a horrible doubt as to his right of paternity?

In this channel flowed the reflections of Lady Octavian Meredith: but her surmises could furnish no possible solution for old Marguerite's conduct. She was loath to come to the conclusion that it was a wanton act of cruelty or inconsiderateness—especially as all Marguerite's antecedents appeared, from what Zoe had that day heard, to be characterized by fidelity and affection towards the family whom she served, as well as by general prudence and discretion. Had the old woman, therefore, some special motive?—was her conduct based upon good grounds?—Zoe was bewildered what to think.

She repaired to the drawing-room,—where she found Clarine seated in a pensive mood at the window; and thinking to enliven her, Lady Octavian proposed to play upon the new piano. Then Clarine burst into tears.

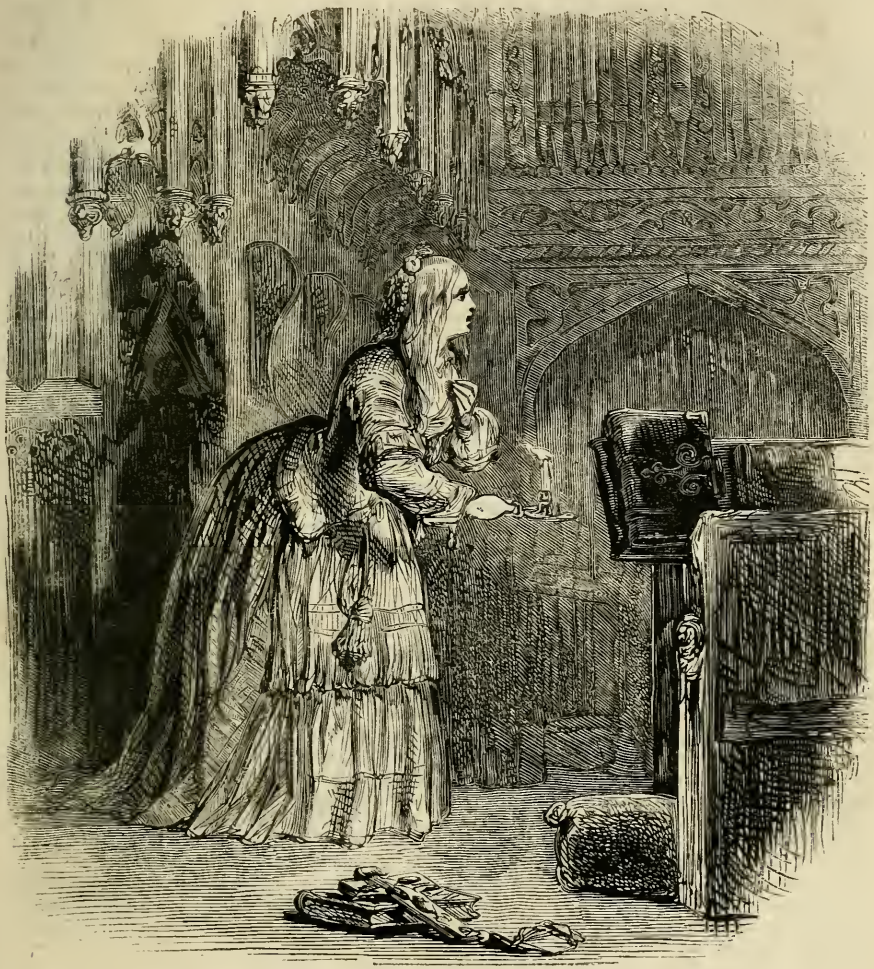
"He who so kindly gave me that piano yesterday," said the afflicted young lady, "doubts whether I am really his daughter! And yet how generous of him thus to minister unto my whims and caprices! A thought occurred to me yesterday—and it was for the first time in my life—that the conduct of my father——for by *that* name must I ever call him——had been deficient in the tenderness of affection which a parent shows towards a child. But now, after all I learnt last night, I ought to wonder that he has ever shown me any love or kindness at all! Oh, my dear Zoe, with these dreadful ideas that are now floating in my brain, I feel as if I myself were utterly, utterly unworthy of all regard—all kindness on my father's part!"

"Speak not thus, dear Clarine," said Lady Octavian: "you are not responsible for your mother's frailty. You must conquer your feelings—indeed, indeed you must! You do not wish your father to perceive that there is anything strange or unusual with you; and yet you are adopting the very course which may betray to him that your knowledge of to-day is far different from your knowledge of yesterday!"

The amiable Zoe continued to reason in this manner, and to give her friend Clarine the best possible advice. She even induced her to sit down and practise at the new piano: but the unhappy Mademoiselle Volney, though doing her best to assume a tranquil exterior, nevertheless seemed as if she had received a blow from which she would never recover.

During the dinner-time Zoe was in a continuous apprehension lest M. Volney should notice the frequent moods of pre-occupation and abstraction into which Clarine fell: but fortunately he did not—or if so, he appeared not to be conscious of the circumstance. He retired as usual to his study soon after dinner: the two ladies passed the evening together; and though Lady Octavian exerted herself to her utmost to cheer Clarine's spirits, the attempt was evidently ineffectual: for when Clarine forced herself to smile, it was in so sickly a manner that the unhappy young lady's countenance appeared to reflect all the anguish of a breaking heart.

As the evening deepened, and the usual hour of separation was drawing nigh, Zoe's amiable and considerate disposition suggested an idea, which, she flattered herself, would be fraught with solace to her suffering friend.



"My dear Clarine," she said, "you are in such a frame of mind that I do not like to leave you by yourself for so many long, long hours. There is always consolation in the companionship of friendship: suffer me to pass the night with you?"

Sudden was the start, and for an instant singular and unaccountable was the look, with which Clarine received that kindly meant proposition: then, the next moment winding her arms about Zoe's neck, she murmured, "No, my dear friend! Think me not ungrateful—think not that I fail to appreciate your generous kindness: but it will be better for me to be alone with my own thoughts—to commune with myself—and to study well the pathway which I have henceforth to pursue!"

"I beseech you, Clarine," persisted Zoe, "to grant me my request. The night is gloomy—the weather has changed since the morning—the wind is moaning round and through the old Chateau; and when the mind is attenuated by sorrowful thoughts——"

"Oh, I have no superstitious terrors!" ejaculated Clarine quickly. "A thousand thanks, my dear friend, for your kindness—a thousand thanks!—but I will pass the night alone——And perhaps to-morrow—to-morrow," she repeated, with a singularly anguished and abstracted look, "I shall be more resigned—I shall be all the better prepared to meet my sad, sad destiny!"

For an instant it struck Zoe that there was something peculiar—something unnatural or at all events incomprehensibly mysterious in Clarine's look and manner, as well as in her tone: but when Mademoiselle Volney had embraced her and hurried forth from the apartment, Lady Octavian thought within herself, "It is the bitterness of her affliction which renders her thus strange. Alas! grief does indeed at times produce eccentric aberrations of the reason: and, poor Clarine! she

has not the same fortitude as myself in yielding to that which she so piteously described as a sad, sad destiny!"

On quitting Zoe, Clarine proceeded as usual to M. Volney's study, to imprint the wonted kiss upon his brow and receive that nightly benediction which he never failed to give. Oh! how tumultuously did poor Clarine's heart beat as she approached that study-door!—with what a sense of anguish did she stop to press her hands against her heaving bosom, as if she could thereby silence the palpitations of that heart of her's!—and how painfully for a few instants did she find herself compelled to lean against the wall for support. But it sometimes happens that at the very crisis of the most torturing ordeal a preternatural fortitude suddenly seizes upon those who are to go through it,—nerving them with the requisite amount of courage. And thus was it now with Clarine. She regained a degree of outward composure which astonished herself; and the next instant she stood in her father's presence.

"Sit down, Clarine," said M. Volney. "I would speak to you a few words."

Fortunate for her was it that his countenance was half averted, and that he completely shaded his eyes with his hand as he thus spoke: for if he had only happened to glance towards her at the instant, he would have seen that all her composure suddenly vanished, and that she sank upon the seat as if overcome by a mortal terror.

"Clarine," continued M. Volney, "I have long wished to speak to you on a particular subject; and the few words which passed between us yesterday, more than ever impressed me with the necessity of so doing. You see that I am awakening to a sense of your lonely position, shut out as you are from that society in which at your age it is natural you should desire to mix—and indeed in which you *ought* to mix. Yes, my poor child! I will henceforth endeavour to consider you more and myself less than I have hitherto done. You will not always have Lady Octavian Meredith with you: I dare say that she will soon become wearied of this monotonous mode of life——"

"On the contrary, my dear father," Clarine ventured softly to observe: "Lady Octavian loves this seclusion where she has found a home. As for myself——"

"I know that you are a good and obedient girl," interrupted M. Volney somewhat hastily: "and it is that which——"

But he suddenly stopped short,—his countenance still averted, his eyes still shaded by his hand. A deep but inaudible sigh slowly convulsed Clarine's bosom: for she comprehended only too well how her father would have finished his sentence if he had not caught back the words which had involuntarily risen to his lips. He would have said, "It is this that makes me show you whatsoever love and kindness you have ever known on my part!"

"Yes—you are a good and dutiful girl," continued M. Volney after a pause: and still he seemed as if he dared not turn his eyes towards Clarine. "And now listen to me attentively: listen also with that complying and obedient spirit which you have ever manifested towards me. I said yesterday that we are all mortal—that I am advanced in years, and that in the ordinary course of nature my time must soon come. And then too there are accidents and casualties—and it may likewise be, Clarine," he continued, speaking in disjointed sentences, as if he were really much moved inwardly, though his voice was cold,—"and then too, Clarine, it may enter into my plans to send you where you may mingle in that society where you ought to move——"

"But my dear father——"

"Do not interrupt me," he said, waving his hand somewhat impatiently, and then replacing that same hand before his eyes to shade them again: "but listen in silence. The injunction I am about to give you is one vitally necessary——and yet I cannot explain the reasons—nor must you ever seek to know them. It is true that accident may some day waft them to your ear; and if so ——But no matter! Listen to my injunction! You cannot always remain a prisoner in this old Chateau, Clarine: sooner or later you will go into the great world—and there you will mingle amidst the busy throng. Let me hope, too, that your hand will be sought in marriage by some eligible suitor: for I have already told you, Clarine, that you will be rich at my death. Weep not—weep not, my poor girl!"

Thus speaking, M. Volney rose suddenly from his chair; and pressing his lips to Clarine's forehead, he smoothed down her hair for a few moments with his hand. He then resumed his seat,—shading his countenance as before.

"Let me hasten," he said, "to conclude this scene, and to specify the injunction towards which I am so long in coming. It is this, Clarine:—that there is one person in the world whom you must never suffer to approach you—one person with whom no friendly words must ever be exchanged by your lips: and if you felt that your heart could possibly love this one to whom I allude, pluck that heart out of you—kill yourself sooner——"

A cry thrilled from Clarine's lips: M. Volney started up from his seat; and the afflicted young lady exclaimed, "O father! father!"

"Pardon me Clarine! I have been too abrupt—too vehement likewise! I have made use of language which is indeed but too well calculated to startle and horrify you, incomprehensible as it must be!"

Again M. Volney passed his hand caressingly over her hair; and in a tremulous voice he said, "Courage, Clarine—courage for only a few moments! Bear with me—have patience! This is a scene which is necessary *now*—but which need never be renewed!"

Again did he return to his seat: and again did he shade his countenance with his hand.

"It is possible, Clarine," he continued, "that sooner or later in the great world you may meet an individual bearing the name of the Viscount Delorme."

Clarine gasped with anguish: but no audible sound came from her lips—yet her face was of a death-like pallor.

"It is this man," continued M. Volney, perfectly unconscious that Clarine had exhibited any fresh paroxysm of emotion,—"it is this man whom you must avoid as if he were a mortal enemy. If I be living when you should thus happen to meet him,—supposing you ever *do* meet—recollect that it would fill my cup with misery to overflowing if

you were to disobey me: and if I be dead, say to yourself that even from the tomb itself the spirit-voice of him who has cherished you proclaims the existence of an eternal gulf between yourself and that same Viscount Delorme!"

Having thus spoken, M. Volney remained for more than a minute with his looks averted and his hand still shading his countenance. This gave Clarine leisure to compose her own agonized feelings somewhat; and it was once more with a preternatural fortitude, astonishing even herself, that she became armed.

"And now good night, Clarine—good night, my dear girl!" said M. Volney, at length rising from his seat, and once more imprinting a kiss upon the young lady's forehead.

"Good night, dearest father," she murmured: and the next moment the door closed behind her.

She sped up to her own chamber—she threw herself upon her knees—she buried her countenance in the bedding: she wept and sobbed convulsively. She called upon God to strengthen her: she gave vent to low but passionately uttered words of agony. It was sad—it was sad indeed, to think that one of her age, in the bloom of incipient womanhood, when the world ought to be stretching like a lovely garden full of flowers before her vision,—Oh! it was sad that she should experience such utter desolation of the heart. And yet it was so. Alas, poor Clarine!

But we must now return to Lady Octavian Meredith. Little suspecting what was passing between Clarine and her father, Zoe had retired to her own chamber. She felt not the slightest inclination to retire to rest; and she dismissed her maid for the night without beginning to disapparel herself. She sate down to reflect on all she had heard that day: she was mournful on her friend Clarine's account; and the thought of the sorrows of another sharpened instead of mitigated the recollection of her own. The wind was moaning dismally without; and these sounds were by no means calculated to cheer Lady Octavian's spirits. She remembered the circumstances which for two consecutive nights had alarmed her when crossing the passage; and she could not possibly repress the cold shudder of a superstitious awe.

Nearly half-an-hour had elapsed since Zoe sought her chamber—and she was still seated at her toilet-table without commencing the slightest preparation for retiring to rest. She was falling into a deeper and deeper reverie,—in which all that concerned herself, all that concerned Clarine, as well as the legend attached to the Chateau, were blended—yet in no confused and incomprehensible jumble. Presently the idea gradually began to steal into Lady Octavian's mind that strange sounds were being wafted to her ear,—sounds that were distinct from the dull dismal moaning of the wind—sounds which no current of air in its gush through the passage could possibly create. A feeling of terror crept over Lady Octavian: she listened with suspended breath. The sounds were like the continuous moaning of a human voice,—now swelling into a louder strain of agony—then sinking into the lowest and most plaintive wail. What could it be? She thought of Clarine. But no—impossible! The two chambers were separated by the old chapel, or oratory; and no notes of sorrow sounding in Clarine's room, could be heard by Zoe in her own. Then, what was it? She was now so excited by alarm that her feelings grew almost desperate: she could not endure this horrible state of suspense.

Starting up from her seat, Zoe seized the taper and was about to open the door in the hasty violence of her excited feelings, when she suddenly recollected that it would not be well to alarm others who were in the house. She was naturally courageous, and therefore considerate. She opened the door with the utmost gentleness—and looked forth into the passage. It was natural that her glances should be tremblingly and shudderingly cast in that direction where she had twice seen—or at least fancied she had seen the figure that had so much alarmed her: but now she beheld nothing. She advanced, treading noiselessly, and stopping at every instant to listen. She could now distinguish more distinctly than at first those sounds which had brought her forth from her chamber. Moaning and plaintive were they—now continuous and prolonged—then dying away—then gradually rising again, or else suddenly springing up from silence. The idea that it was a human voice grew fainter and fainter in the mind of Lady Octavian Meredith: but still she was utterly at a loss to comprehend what the source or cause of these sounds might be.

She had halted just in front of the folding-doors belonging to the oratorio, or small chapel, intervening betwixt her own chamber and Clarine's; and she was convinced that the strange unaccountable sounds came from within that chapel. She mechanically placed her hand upon the old-fashioned rusted latch of those doors: it yielded to her touch—and one of the leaves of the tall portals opened slightly. The gust of wind which issued forth, nearly extinguished Zoe's taper: but fortunately she just shaded the light in time to save it. She pushed the door further open: the sounds had now altogether ceased: but expecting that they would revive again, she was impelled by curiosity to enter the chapel. She found herself first of all in a little vestibule, in front of which hung a heavy curtain, whose material had once been a rich velvet: but the entire drapery was now so faded, so torn, and so tattered, that it was a mere worthless rag. It seemed as if the hand of a child might tear it down, so flimsy was it. It waved slowly to and fro with the wind which swept through the chapel; and now once more did those strange sounds reach the ear of Lady Octavian Meredith. It was evident that the wind wafted them: but still she was at a loss to conceive their source.

It was with a feeling bordering upon superstitious awe, that Zoe stretched forth her hand to put aside the curtain in order to enter the oratory. A scream was well nigh bursting from her lips when she beheld what appeared to be a couple of tall dark figures standing just within: but a second glance showed her that they were two suits of armour standing upright—one sustaining a lance in a perpendicular position—and both having a life-like appearance. These panoplies were in every respect perfect. The vizors of the helmets were closed,—so that it was easy to fancy the human wearers were within those rusted steel suits. The helmets, too, were surmounted with plumes; and there was something ominous and

awe-inspiring in the motionless attitude of those panoplies. Indeed, for an instant Zoe could scarcely divest herself of the idea that they would either advance towards her, or that a voice would emanate from behind the barred aventayles of the helmets.

Speedily recovering her self-possession, Lady Octavian Meredith approached the suits of armour, and inspected them. She endeavoured to lift one of the closed vizors: but it resisted the force of her delicate hand,—doubtless because the nails forming the rivets on which it moved, were completely rusted in their settings. Turning away from these panoplies, Zoe advanced farther into the chapel. It bore all the evidences of neglect: the walls were covered with damp—the tall, slender, sculptured shafts which sustained the pointed roof, were green with mildew. Some of the windows were totally deficient in glass; and the wind swept through them. At the farther extremity was an organ, placed in a gallery: but the yellow reed-like arrangement of the frontage was so dingy with collected dust, and perhaps with damp likewise, that the original vividness of its colouring could no longer be discerned. A dilapidated staircase led up towards the gallery: but the balustrade of bronze, elaborately worked with beautiful devices, remained perfect, though utterly dimmed and disfigured by the encrusted rust. There were several large pictures suspended to the walls: the frames were ruined—the canvass was torn, or else had given way with the effects of time and neglect; and the subjects of the paintings were unrecognisable.

While gazing about her, and holding up the light in the manner that would best aid her in this survey, Zoe perceived that a portion of the floor of the gallery had given way; and she could thus look up into a part of the interior of the organ. While thus gazing in that direction, Zoe heard the wind come rushing in through the broken windows with renewed force; and as it swept gustily into the chapel, those strange sounds were more audibly renewed than before. An idea struck Zoe: a light flashed in unto her mind:—she comprehended those sounds in an instant. They were caused by the wind rushing up through the dilapidated floor of the gallery, and passing through the pipes of the organ. According to the gusty variations of the wind, so were the sounds produced,—solemnly swelling or plaintively wailing; and thus the mystery was explained.

Zoe could now afford to smile at the apprehension which had brought her forth from her chamber; and she said to herself, "Doubtless my fancy in respect to the figure which I have twice seen in the gallery, would be explained with equal ease if accident or research were only to place me on the right track. The causes of these superstitious fears prove to be nothing more than mere natural ones when their mystery is fathomed—in the same way that a ghost, with its white extended arms, seen by the roadside of a dark night, turns out when approached to be merely a sign-post."

Lady Octavian Meredith began to retrace her way through the chapel; and once more did she find herself in the vicinage of the two suits of armour. She now passed them without the slightest dread; and she was about to draw back the curtain, when she was startled by a sound as of a door opening close by. She looked back; and she beheld a figure muffled in a cloak, and wearing what seemed to be a low slouching hat. Again did a scream well nigh part from Zoe's lips; and it was a marvel that the light did not fall from her hand: but a second glance revealed to her the countenance of M. Volney. He was standing in evident astonishment at beholding the Lady Octavian there; and she, feeling that her position was an awkward one, resolved to be candid at once.

"Monsieur Volney," she accordingly said, "you are naturally amazed to behold me in this chapel: but I beseech you to suffer me to explain."

"I am certain," responded the French gentleman, with that courtesy which he was always accustomed to exhibit towards Zoe, "that your ladyship can have none but a justifiable motive for being absent from your chamber at this hour."

Zoe at once proceeded to explain how her ear had caught a succession of sounds which had at first alarmed her—and how, being worked up to an intolerable degree of excitement, she had issued from her room in the hope of ascertaining the source of that which had filled her with apprehension. She went on to observe that she was unwilling to disturb any one — and that, in all probability, if she had failed to discover the cause of those sounds, she should have kept the secret to herself.

"Because," she added, "nothing makes a person appear more ridiculous than the confession of having given way to superstitious terror."

She then proceeded to explain how she had discovered that the pipes of the organ were the sources of the sounds which had alarmed her.

"I agree with your ladyship," said M. Volney, who had listened with deep attention to Zoe's narrative, "that it is always better in such cases to proceed to an investigation at once. But tell me frankly, Lady Octavian Meredith," he continued, fixing his regards scrutinizingly upon her, —"is this the only source of alarm which you have experienced since you have been in the Chateau?"

Zoe blushed—and for an instant looked confused: but the next moment recovering her self-possession, she said, "I will answer you frankly, M. Volney; and if I had intended to suppress certain circumstances which I am now about to reveal, it was only because I dreaded to appear ridiculous in your eyes."

"Speak, Lady Octavian," said the French gentleman, still regarding her with a visible interest, and with a strong, even painful curiosity.

Zoe proceeded to explain how she had twice seen a figure gliding rapidly and noiselessly along at the extremity of the passage, and at about the same hour on the two consecutive evenings.

"Is your ladyship sure," inquired M. Volney, "that these were not the phantoms of mere imagination, influenced by the knowledge of the legend attached to the Chateau?"

"It is possible that the second occurrence might thus have been the result of fancy," answered Zoe; "although in my own mind I can scarcely arrive at such a conviction. But that in the first instance it was quite otherwise, I can positively affirm, inasmuch as it was not until the following morning I became acquainted with the legend, when one of my maids was accidentally led to narrate it."

"I positively charged my daughter as well as the servants," said M. Volney, "not to make that legend the subject of their idle gossip in respect to either your ladyship or your own domestics: for though I had too high an opinion of *your* intellect, Lady Octavian, to imagine for a moment that such a tale would at all disturb your equanimity—yet I was less certain in respect to your maids. For the minds of those who are only partially educated, are more susceptible of the influence of superstitious terrors——"

"I will candidly inform you, M. Volney," said Zoe, "that it was the gardener who acquainted my maids with that legend: but I beseech you not to visit him with your displeasure."

"And you saw that form while as yet ignorant of the legend?" said M. Volney in a musing tone, and with a strange darkness of the looks. "Then I myself could not possibly have been deceived!"

"What mean you?" inquired Zoe quickly, as well as anxiously.

"What appearance had the figure?" asked M. Volney, without heeding Lady Octavian's question.

"I saw it but dimly," rejoined her ladyship; "and whatever it might have been——I mean if it were some real living intruder——I could not conscientiously declare upon my oath in a Court of Justice that the description, as it was faintly impressed upon my mind, is the accurate one. But it certainly seemed to me to be the form of a tall man, of slender figure—young too, I should think—and apparelled in dark garments. My ear caught not the slightest sound of a footfall on either occasion; and thus, when after the first occurrence I heard that legend which represents how the unfortunate Lenoir is supposed to glide with his shoeless feet through the passages of this Chateau, I was certainly struck with a strange feeling."

"Yes—strange, most strange!" muttered M. Volney: and then he looked deeply perplexed.

"And you yourself," said Zoe, again in anxious inquiry, "have some reason——"

"Your ladyship has been candid with me," interrupted the French gentleman: "I will be equally candid with you. Listen, Lady Octavian! Never until this night was I in the faintest degree affected by that legend. Indeed, I have very rarely thought of it since the first day—some five years back—that it was communicated to me. But to-night it is different! I was ascending from my study to my own chamber, when methought that at the end of a passage I beheld a form—just as you have described it—and in exact correspondence with the superstitious details of the legend. Not however that I perceived the countenance of that form: it was merely the figure itself; and it was gliding along noiselessly as if with shoeless feet—as you yourself have just explained it. I was staggered: methought it was an hallucination: I passed my hand across my eyes; and when I looked again, the figure was gone. I proceeded to my chamber, endeavouring to persuade myself that it was mere fancy on my part: but the idea haunted me. I repaired to the gardener's room, to assure myself that it could not have been that man thus roaming stealthily about: I entered—he was sleeping soundly—I retired without awakening him. Then it occurred to me that some evil-intentioned individual might have got into the Chateau. The night being windy and unusually bleak for the season of the year, I enveloped myself in my cloak—secured a brace of pistols about my person—and prepared to issue forth to make the round of the premises. As you are perhaps aware, there is a staircase at each extremity of the gallery; and doors are at the bottom of those staircases. I descended the stairs of that extremity where I had seen the form: the door at the bottom was locked, as usual, but a general pass-key which I have about me at once opened it. I went forth: I made the circuit of the building: I could distinguish no signs of any burglarious entry. I returned by a private staircase opening into this chapel, and the door of which is just behind that farther suit of armour. You may conceive my astonishment on beholding your ladyship here."

Zoe had listened with the deepest attention to his narrative,—a narrative which appeared most materially to confirm her own belief that what she had seen was very far from being a delusion. There was a silence of some minutes, during which both herself and M. Volney were buried in profound thought: but it was at length broken by that gentleman,—who said, "It is impossible, Lady Octavian, we can blind ourselves to the fact that we have indeed seen something. But it were useless to inspire others beneath this roof with any apprehensions. Such I have already ascertained to be your ladyship's own considerate idea; and therefore I need not suggest that we keep silent on these points."

Zoe readily gave M. Volney an assurance to a similar effect; and they separated. But when Lady Octavian once more found herself alone in her own chamber, she experienced a renewal of a superstitious terror, which despite all her efforts she could not cast off. At length, ashamed of herself, she retired to rest: but when sleep stole upon her eyes, her dreams were haunted by the stealthily gliding form of the murdered Lenoir—by hideous shapes, uncouth and terrible—by suits of armour marching majestically before her mental vision, their plumes waving ominously above their helmets. And then, too, it appeared to her that the organ in the chapel was pouring forth its full tide of lugubrious and mournful harmony—swelling at length into a terrific volume of sound, which rolled its awful diapason through the entire building. When Zoe awoke, the light of the refulgent sun was streaming in at the windows: the wind had completely gone down: the heavens were clear and beautiful; and the climate of that Pyrenean region was as serene, as warm, and as genial as Zoe had at first known it.

CHAPTER CIV.

THE PRECIPICE.

When Lady Octavian Meredith met M. Volney and Clarine at the breakfast-table, she perceived that the countenance of the former was more pale, more haggard, and more care-worn than she had as yet seen it, and that Clarine's cheeks had likewise lost their colour. She herself was pallid

and much indisposed, through having passed so troubled a night: there was little conversation—and no one asked the cause why the others were dull. Doubtless M. Volney fancied that the conversation which he had with his daughter in his study on the preceding evening, had affected her spirits: but Zoe attributed her friend's mournfulness to her knowledge of all those mysteries which so intimately regarded her sire.

Immediately after breakfast, M. Volney quitted the room; and the ladies were left to themselves. Zoe at once proposed that they should go forth to walk: for she fancied that the fresh air and the cheerful aspect of nature would have a healthful influence over herself, and would tend to improve the spirits of her friend Clarine. Mademoiselle Volney at once assented: and they went forth together.

"Wherefore, my dear friend," asked Lady Octavian, "do you not endeavour to surmount this melancholy which has taken possession of you? Believe me, dear Clarine, your father cannot fail shortly to perceive——"

"Zoe," interrupted Mademoiselle Volney suddenly, and speaking as if with a strange wild gust of feeling, "you know——Oh, you know not how wretchedly unhappy I am!"

"I know it, my sweet friend," responded Lady Octavian in a deeply compassionating tone; "and I need not assure you that you possess my warmest sympathy. But for your own sake, and that of your father——"

"O Zoe!" interrupted Clarine with passionate vehemence, "you do not understand me! If you only knew all!"

"Heavens! my dear friend," said Lady Octavian; "is there anything that you have concealed from me? Yes—yes—I perceive it!—there is something more than what I already know, and that is making you thus miserable! Clarine," continued Lady Octavian very seriously, "if there be aught in which you require the counsel of a friend, I beseech you to make me your confidante!"

"Yes—I will—I ought!" said Clarine, now sobbing violently, and for a few moments wringing her hands as if with frantic grief. "You know not half my wretchedness! All that you *do* know is surely enough to account for a world of misery; but my heart holds enough to fill the entire universe!"

"Good heavens! what words are these to come from your lips, Clarine?" said Zoe. "You frighten—you terrify me! I beseech you to relieve me from this cruel suspense: for believe me—Oh! believe me, Clarine, the friendship I entertain for you is as great as if we had known each other for years instead of weeks!"

Mademoiselle Volney had all of a sudden grown calm: she bent a look of ineffable gratitude upon Lady Octavian Meredith: then she took her hand, and pressed it to her bosom. They walked on for some minutes in silence,—Clarine buried in profound reflection—Lady Octavian burning to become acquainted with her beloved friend's source of anguish, yet not daring to put another question on the subject. They had walked in a direction which, when together, they had never happened to take before: it was on one of those slopes which gradually ascend into the mountainous outskirts of the Pyrenees; and all of a sudden they came upon the brink of a deep yawning chasm.

"It was here!" shrieked forth Clarine, as abruptly catching her friend Zoe by the arm, she held her back.

Lady Octavian Meredith was far more startled with Clarine's tone and manner, than even by the fact of finding herself on the verge of that abyss: because there was a low paling fencing it—and therefore nothing too dangerous to prevent the instantaneous recovery of her presence of mind.

"What do you mean, my dear friend?" she asked: "what do you mean by saying that it was *here?*"

Clarine spoke not a word—but led the way towards a little knot of trees higher up the slope, and at about a distance of two hundred yards from the ravine on the escarped side of which they had so suddenly halted. Beneath the shade of those trees the ladies sate down; and Clarine, looking towards the chasm, heaved a profound sigh and murmured, "It was there!"

Zoe said nothing, but looked anxiously in Mademoiselle Volney's face, at the same time pressing her hand to assure her in advance of whatsoever sympathy might properly be yielded to the tale of affliction she was about to tell. For that it *was* a tale of woe which was presently to issue from Mademoiselle Volney's lips, Zoe could not possibly doubt.

"Listen to me, my dear friend," said Clarine; "and I will tell you everything—yes, I will tell you everything! I will relieve this surcharged heart of mine. Although my life was so lonely here, yet was it happy enough for several years—because mine was *then* a disposition which could readily adapt itself to all circumstances; and moreover it was sufficient for me that my father thought fit to settle our abiding-place in this neighbourhood. My music, my books, and my embroidery or other needlework, served to wile away much of my time. It was very rarely indeed that my father invited me to walk out with him; and when I took exercise by myself, I was frequently in the habit of bringing with me a book, which I would either read while walking along, or else I would seat myself in some shade like this to study its pages at my leisure. One day—a few months ago—my father said to me that he feared I must experience the monotonous loneliness of the life I was leading; and he volunteered a promise to procure me some eligible female companionship. I was rejoiced at his kindness—but assured him that I was perfectly content to live in the way that best suited his own tastes and habits. He nevertheless reiterated his intention to adopt the means of affording me some little change or recreation. After this interview I reflected much on what my father had said; and I was pleased at the idea. I remember that the very day following——Oh! how could I ever forget that day? Is not its date indelibly graven on my memory?"

Here Mademoiselle Volney paused for a few minutes,—during which she reflected profoundly; and then she continued in the following strain:—

"It was on the day after that conversation, as I have just said, that I came forth to take my usual exercise. I brought a book with me; and I roamed in this direction. The book that I brought

was one I had purchased on the previous day in the village. It was Lamartine's *Jocelyn*—a beautiful poem, characterized by the most touching pathos as well as interspersed with descriptions of mountain scenery that at times enchant and at others over-awe the soul. I became so deeply interested in the volume as I walked along, that I perceived not the frightful peril towards which I was advancing. All of a sudden—while my eyes were riveted upon the book, and I had no thought for anything besides its absorbing, riveting interest—I was startled by a loud cry warning me of danger. But it was too late—or rather perhaps the cry itself accelerated the mischief which it strove to prevent: for bounding forwards with the sudden impression that some peril threatened me from behind, I fell over that precipice."

"Good heavens, Clarine!" ejaculated Lady Octavian, horrified at the bare idea.

"Yes—it is all too true!" continued Mademoiselle Volney. "I had advanced towards a spot where the railing was broken away: it has since been repaired. I fell over: but the outstretching trunk of a tree growing forth from the side of the chasm, caught me about a dozen feet below the edge. You may conceive the wild terror that filled my brain as hanging over the trunk of that tree, I looked down into the fearful gulf, along the depth of which a stream was eddying and foaming. But succour was nigh. He whose well-meant warning had pealed upon my ear, lowered himself down by means of the roots growing out of the side of the precipice. I remember that as I looked up and saw him hanging above me, sustained only by those frail and uncertain means of support, the dizziness which had before prevailed in my brain amounted to a torturing frenzy. I did not immediately faint—but I have lost the recollection of the precise means that were adopted by my deliverer to save me, and himself too, from our perilous position. I however recollect that when at length safe on the firm land above, I fell into a swoon. On slowly coming back to consciousness, I found my deliverer hanging over me. When I tell you, Zoe, that he is the handsomest of men—at least in my eyes—that he is gifted with a rare intelligence—that his manners are fascinating—that his conversation has charms such as I never experienced before——"

"I understand you, my sweet friend," murmured Zoe mournfully: for as it now proved to be a tale of love to which she was thus listening, she was most painfully reminded of that love of her's which had at first been her joy but had since proved the source of so much misery.

"Yes, I love him—love him passionately!" resumed Clarine, with a violent burst of feeling. "But I forgot—I am wandering from the continuous routine of my narrative! My deliverer knew who I was: he had been in this neighbourhood a day or two previous to the adventure which thus threw us together; and I gathered from what he said that I had been pointed out to him. I could not find words to express my gratitude for the service he had rendered me at the peril of his own life; and I invited him to the Chateau that he might receive my father's thanks likewise. But he declined; and in the gentlest manner he counselled me not to inform my father of what had happened,—arguing that it was useless to distress him on account of a danger that was passed. I considered that one who had rescued me from destruction had a right to proffer his advice; and I promised to follow it. Besides, my thoughts were all in such confusion that I had not the power to deliberate calmly with myself. We parted—and on returning to the Chateau, I did my best to compose my troubled feelings. My father did not return home till the dinner-hour: he was wearied and ill—he had evidently been rambling far—and thus if I had experienced any inclination to act contrary to the advice of my unknown deliverer, my father's state of mind and body would have rendered me obedient to that well-meant advice. I therefore said nothing on the subject. For the next two or three days my father was confined to his bed; and to distress him under such circumstances with the revelation of my adventure, was now totally out of the question. I continued in attendance upon him; and when he was restored to health again, it was too late to mention the incident."

"Confess the truth, my dear Clarine," said Zoe, with a sweet melancholy smile: "that handsome stranger had on the very first occasion obtained more or less influence over your heart as well as over your mind?"

"It is true—I believe that it is true," responded Clarine: "for his image was constantly in my thoughts—so that even when by myself, I would blush at the idea of so incessantly thinking of the handsome countenance which I had seen bending over me when recovering from my state of unconsciousness after my rescue from that frightful peril. Nevertheless, solemnly do I assure you that when next I walked out again, after my father's recovery, I had not the slightest expectation of meeting my handsome unknown deliverer. And yet we met. It was in quite a different direction from where we first encountered each other—two miles away from this spot which is so close by the scene of my peril and my deliverance. He approached me in a manner in which kindness and courtesy were blended, as if he felt that circumstances had placed us on a friendly footing. Almost his very first question was whether I had followed his advice in respect to my father?—and I answered that I had. We walked together for about half an hour,—the time flying so quickly that it appeared to me as if we had only been a few brief minutes together. When we were about to separate, he delicately hinted that I ought not now to mention our acquaintance to my father; for that if I did, I must necessarily explain how it commenced, and then he would chide me for having kept the matter secret at all. I have said that my deliverer spoke with the utmost delicacy of language; and it was also with a mingled entreaty and diffidence in his tone: but nevertheless a pang shot through my heart—I felt hurt—I should even have been indignant, were it not that I remembered that I owed my life to him, and that he had as magnanimously perilled his own to save it. He saw what was passing in my mind: he even looked pleased—he seized my hand—he said that he comprehended the natural delicacy of my thoughts and my sense of propriety—he implored me not to be incensed against him, for that he would explain his meaning and his object in beseeching me to keep the seal of silence upon my

lips. I asked for that explanation at once: he wished to postpone it until the morrow. I then said to him, as nearly as I can recollect, the following words:—'You have saved my life, Sir, and you have every claim upon my gratitude. Of that gratitude I have the liveliest sense; but my own idea of propriety must not be absorbed therein—nor the duty that I owe towards my father. If you purpose to remain in this neighbourhood, and we stand a chance of meeting again, I must assuredly mention to my father the acquaintance which I have had the honour to form.'—It was thus that I spoke."

"And you spoke wisely and well!" exclaimed Zoe, in a tone of enthusiasm. "I am delighted to hear that such was your conduct, Clarine. It was dignified and becoming, without the slightest sacrifice of that gratitude which you owed to the saviour of your life."

"Yes—it was thus I spoke," said Mademoiselle Volney; "and my deliverer looked distressed. He paced to and fro on the spot where we had halted: I began to be alarmed that I had fallen in with some unworthy character, especially as I now recollected that he had not even mentioned his name nor where he was living, nor what business had brought him into that neighbourhood.—'Do you,' he at length said, 'insist upon knowing who I am?'—'I do,' I answered, 'if there be any chance of our meeting again.'—Then he told me a tale of how he had been engaged in a political conspiracy—how he had been obliged to flee from Paris—and how he had sought this distant and secluded neighbourhood in the hope that he might dwell unrecognised here for a few weeks, while his influential friends in the capital exerted all their interest to hush up the matter. He added that he was personally known to my father, whom he had seen at Fontainebleau a few years back, when he was a youth; and that therefore if he now presented himself to my sire, the latter would be endangering his own safety by not surrendering him up to justice. Finally he informed me that his name was Claude Masson; that he was a gentleman of wealth and excellent family: that he had no doubt his friends would shortly succeed in smoothing down the temporary difficulties which beset his path; and he therefore threw himself completely on my mercy."

"And what response did you make, my dear Clarine?" inquired Zoe.

"I at once assured him," replied Mademoiselle Volney, "that not for worlds would I do aught that should injure a hair of his head; that therefore I would keep profoundly secret his presence in the neighbourhood, as well as all he had just been telling me; but that inasmuch as I must of necessity, under circumstances, remain silent even to my own father, it would be the height of impropriety on my part to converse with M. Claude Masson again. Such were the terms in which I spoke; and then, with a salutation which I afterwards fancied to have been too coldly distant towards one who had saved my life, I hastened away. Some days passed; and I purposely avoided going out for fear of meeting M. Masson. And yet, dear Zoe——But you will blame me for my weakness——And yet, I say, in my heart, did I long to behold him again! Can you understand these contradictory sentiments? I feared, yet I longed ——I dreaded, yet I wished——I trembled, yet I hoped!"

"Yes, my sweet friend," said Zoe, in a soft murmuring voice; "I can understand you—Oh! I can understand you! You loved—and love is a sentiment compounded of a thousand contradictions: it is the eccentricity of the soul, as other strange fantastic ways are the eccentricities of the disposition or the manner. How often, when one loves, is the duty opposed to the inclination!—how often does a sense of delicacy and propriety urge in one direction and the heart's tendency in another! But pray proceed, my sweet Clarine—and tell me how progressed this love-affair—for a love-affair it assuredly is!"

"Several days passed, as I just now said," continued Mademoiselle Volney: "and my rambles had been confined to the garden belonging to the Chateau. At length one morning, immediately after breakfast, my father gave me a bank-note for a thousand francs—which, as you know, is forty pounds sterling of your English money—and he asked me to proceed to the village and pay one or two little bills which had just been sent in. I accordingly set out: I reached the village—and I subsequently remembered that on the outskirts I took a few pence from my reticule to give to a poor woman who implored alms. Then I hastened on, and reached the first shop to which my errand led me: but on thrusting my hand into the reticule, I found that the bank-note was lost. I sped back to the spot where I had encountered the poor woman: but she was no longer there—nor was the bank-note anywhere to be seen. I was sorely distressed: for at that time I believed that my father had really lost his property, and that his means were very limited: I therefore fancied that this would be a very serious loss for him. Besides, I feared that he would charge me with negligence; and altogether I was much afflicted. Suddenly I looked up on hearing a footstep approach: Claude Masson stood before me. I was seized with confusion. In a voice of gentle melancholy—as if pleading for permission to address me—he inquired the cause of my tribulation. I scarcely know in what hurried or bewildered words I explained the occurrence.—'The wind,' he exclaimed, 'blows to this side of the road; and you, Mademoiselle, seem to have been searching on the other.'—Then he hastened in the direction which he had indicated; and suddenly returning towards me, he said, 'Behold the note. I will not avail myself of the little service I thus render you, to intrude any longer on your presence.'—Thus speaking, he hastened away. I felt pained and grieved at the abruptness of his flight: I blamed myself for having spoken too severely to him when last we met: I began to fancy that my conduct was altogether tinged with ingratitude. I sighed profoundly: and again to confess the truth, dear Zoe, I wished that he had remained. However, I held in my hand the bank-note; and I proceeded to execute the commissions entrusted to me by my father. But as I was issuing from one of the shops, I was accosted by the poor woman whom I had previously relieved; and she inquired if I had lost anything? I asked her what she meant: she repeated the question:—a strange idea struck me: it was accompanied by a sensation as if I were experiencing a sudden fright. In terms as confused as those in

which I had ere now spoken to Claude Masson, I faltered out something about a bank-note for a thousand francs. That poor but honest woman at once presented me with the note I had lost, and which I immediately perceived to be slightly of a different colour from that which M. Masson had placed in my hand. I cannot describe the feelings which seized upon me as I took that note; and it was not until I had observed that the poor woman began to regard me somewhat suspiciously, that I regained my self-possession. Then I placed a liberal reward in her hand—and hurried away. I was struck by the generosity of Claude Masson's conduct—a generosity too that was blended with so much delicacy: for little, doubtless, had he anticipated that the real note which was lost would ever be restored to my hand. But, Oh! to think that I now lay under a pecuniary obligation to him! It would have been humiliating, were it not that there was something in the way in which the transaction took place that prevented me from feeling my pride to be humbled. And, after all, I could restore him the note! But I knew not where he lived; and I dared not—for my promise' sake, and with due regard to Claude's safety—name the incident to my father. What was I to do? I must meet him once again: nay, more—I must purposely throw myself in his way: I must seek an opportunity to encounter him. And I did so. For three or four days I rambled everywhere about the neighbourhood—but without seeing him. At length, one afternoon, we suddenly met at the angle of yonder grove which you see, my dear Zoe, about half a mile to the right of the village-church. I had flattered myself that I should have been enabled to address him with calmness and fortitude: but now that the instant for putting me to the test had come, all my self-possession abandoned me. I was full of confusion. Claude Masson took my hand and gazed earnestly

upon my countenance.—'Little as we are acquainted,' he said, in a voice that was soft and low, 'I feel as if I had known you for many, many long years.'—For a few instants I had abandoned him my hand, unconscious of what I was doing: I now snatched it away: but I was trembling violently. Then—more instinctively than because I actually remembered the object for which I had sought this meeting—I drew forth the bank-note and proffered it to him. He started—he blushed—he saw that his generous stratagem had been discovered. I faltered out words of thanks:—how could I do otherwise?—and I know not how it was, but I presently found myself seated by his side on the bank that skirts the grove, and listening to the language of love which he was breathing in my ear. He told me that he had seen me every day since last we met—that he had followed me at a distance, content to obtain a glimpse of my form—and that he had taken care I should not pereeive I was thus followed. Oh, all the tender things he said to me!—yet in language so delicate—in terms so replete with an honest manly frankness, that it was impossible I could feel offended! But all the time my brain was in a sort of whirl; and I had no power of calm deliberation. I know not how we parted——Yes," added Clarine, bending down her blushing countenance, "I remember that when he besought and implored me to be there at the same hour on the following day, I did not refuse him—I suffered him to understand that his request would be granted. It was not until I was again at the Chateau, and in mine own chamber, that I had a right comprehension of everything that had taken place. Then—I must candidly confess the truth—whatsoever regrets I might have experienced at the course I was pursuing unknown to my father, were absorbed in the delicious sense of loving and being beloved. You see, Zoe, that I am telling you everything—I am speaking with frankness and candour—I am unbosoming myself completely unto you. Oh! do you not think I was very weak——"

"Proceed, dear Clarine," said Lady Octavian: "proceed—and let me hear the result."

"After that meeting," resumed Mademoiselle Volney, "we met frequently—frequently: yet on each occasion I thought to myself that I was doing wrong—very wrong! But, alas! love exercised its spell-like influence over me; and I could not command the courage which was requisite for saying the word that was to pronounce our separation. And then too, my dear Zoe, I must not forget to observe that Claude Masson was constantly assuring me the time would soon come when concealment and disguise would be no longer necessary—when he would be enabled openly to proclaim his presence in that district and make himself known to my father—and that then he would reveal his love for me and claim my hand. You see, dear Zoe, it was a delicious dream in which I was cradled—a state of existence so different from that which I had been lately leading—so new to me, that to have returned to the monotony and the solitude of my former mode of life, would have been the destruction of my happiness: it would have been suicidal in respect to my own heart. Thus weeks passed away——"

"And where did Claude Masson live all this while?" inquired Lady Octavian Meredith.

"At a cottage about four miles distant—at least so he informed me," answered Clarine. "Ah! you may conceive the precautions which he constantly took to avoid meeting my father or any one who might chance to know him! And I too had to take precautions in joining him at our trysting-places: but these were not so very difficult—my father never asked me whither I was going nor where I had been: he seemed to take no note of my actions. And sometimes, dear Zoe, when I reflected on all this, I thought to myself that my father was placing illimitable confidence in me, and that I was betraying it. But then, on the other hand, I persuaded myself that this very confidence on my father's part was as much as to abandon me to the discretionary power of catering for my own happiness. I have no doubt that you look upon such an idea as the most miserable sophistry on my part: but if the love which I experience be the same as the love which is felt by others, I am convinced that it is in the very nature of love itself to suggest expedients and even conjure up arguments that are in precise accordance with its own aims, views, or circumstances."

"This is true, Clarine," said Lady Octavian: "the voice of nature speaks a common and universal language through the medium of the heart's love."

"One day," continued Clarine, "my father told me that you would probably become my companion for a while; and to confess the truth I was at first more vexed than pleased—though I did my best to appear grateful to my parent and to seem satisfied at the arrangement that he was making with the best of motives on my behalf. I was told that you were an invalid: I thought therefore that you would be much in your own chamber, and that I should still find leisure to meet him who had become so dear to me. You arrived at the Chateau; and I immediately conceived a friendship for you—a friendship which has ripened into love. Yes, dear Zoe——"

At this instant, Mademoiselle Volney stopped short; and Lady Octavian Meredith instantaneously comprehended wherefore: for M. Volney was approaching from the distance.

"He means to accost us," said Clarine after a few instants' pause. "I must compose myself——Another time I will finish my narrative."

CHAPTER CV.

THE GALLERY IN THE CHATEAU.

M. VOLNEY approached his daughter and Lady Octavian; and he offered to escort them either for a continuation of their walk, or back to the Chateau. Zoe, to whom the choice was especially addressed, decided upon the latter: for she was fearful of rambling too far. During the walk homeward, it was evident that M. Volney strove to converse in a gayer strain than heretofore, and that he sought to make up by present attentions for any remissness on that score of which he had been previously guilty.

On arriving at the Chateau, M. Volney did not instantaneously repair to his study: but he remained in the drawing-room to converse with his daughter and Zoe. He asked them to play upon the piano—he spoke with an unusual degree of tender kindness to Clarine—he was evidently striving also to render himself sociable to Zoe. There could be little doubt that this was the result of a resolve which he had adopted, and which must have arisen from the reflection that it was his duty to sacrifice his own feelings somewhat for the sake of others. Besides, he had promised Clarine that in future he should think less of himself and more of her than he had previously done. In the afternoon the worthy village-priest called; and on being asked to stay to dinner, he accepted the invitation. He did not take his departure until ten o'clock in the evening: the usual period for retiring to rest soon afterwards arrived; and thus the ladies had as yet found no opportunity of renewing that discourse which had been interrupted in the morning.

But now that Clarine had determined to make a confidante of Lady Octavian Meredith, she experienced an anxious yearning to complete the narrative which she had commenced and to place her friend in full possession of all the circumstances which regarded her love and him who was its object. Therefore, so soon as M. Volney had retired, Clarine said to Lady Octavian, "If you do not feel any particular inclination to seek your couch immediately, come to my chamber, dear Zoe, for half-an-hour; and I will conclude the history which my father's presence interrupted in the morning."

Zoe at once signified her readiness to comply with this request, which was indeed quite in accordance with the promptings of her own curiosity; and she added, "I will first dismiss my maid for the night, and in a few minutes I will join you in your chamber."

The ladies now temporarily separated,—repairing to their own rooms. Zoe dispensed with the attendance of the maid whose turn it was to minister unto her; and shortly after the abigail had retired, she issued forth from her chamber. At that very instant she beheld a form—the form of a man—emerge from the door of the oratorio; and at this sudden apparition a cry of terror thrilled from Lady Octavian's lips. She staggered as if about to fall: the individual whose presence had thus startled her, and who for a single instant had stood utterly irresolute how to act, bounded forward and caught her in his arms.

"For heaven's sake, compose yourself!" he said in the low quick voice of intensest anxiety. "Compose yourself, I beseech you!"

At that moment Clarine rushed forth from her chamber; and clasping her hands in wild terror, she said in a hasty excited whisper, "Oh, this imprudence—this madness, after all that I have written to you!"

But now another door opened higher up the passage; and M. Volney hurried forth with a light in his hand. A piercing shriek burst from the lips of Clarine—and she fell senseless upon the floor. Zoe—now completely recovered from her own alarm—sprang forward to raise her friend up: but she was anticipated by the stranger who had emerged from the chapel——though a stranger we can scarcely call him, inasmuch as Zoe had by this time conjectured that he could be none other than Claude Masson. And who but he could have so tenderly raised up the inanimate form of Mademoiselle Volney?—who but he could have gazed with such deep anxiety on her marble countenance, and then flung such deprecating, entreating looks towards her father?

But what words can depict the ghastly horror which the countenance of M. Volney himself displayed as he stopped short just outside the threshold of his own chamber? As if transfixed to the spot, he gazed in frightful consternation upon this scene. The light which he held in his hand, appeared to be illuminating the features of a corpse, so deadly pale was he—so ashy white were his lips. Zoe was horrified, at the same time that she was too much bewildered for deliberate reflection.

All of a sudden it appeared as if M. Volney recovered his self-possession: for he advanced slowly towards the spot in front of the chapel-doors; and he said with a stern voice, "What means this intrusion here?"

"Let the truth be told—yes, let it be proclaimed at once!" cried he who was supporting in his arms the still inanimate form of Clarine. "I love your daughter, M. Volney—I adore her! She loves me in return! For heaven's sake let your animosity cease towards me!"

"She loves you?" exclaimed M. Volney, with a sort of terrific cry that had wildness, horror, and mournfulness in its accents. "Wretched Clarine! wretched Delorme!"—and springing forward, he tore his daughter, as if frantically, from the Viscount's embrace.

What a revelation had just been made to Lady Octavian Meredith's ear! Claude Masson was none other than the Viscount Delorme; and how much that was hitherto mysterious was now suddenly cleared up! For Clarine's lover was tall, slender, and symmetrically formed: a glance showed Zoe that over his boots he wore a pair of those list shoes which are common amongst the French peasantry; and hence the noiselessness of his steps as she had seen him pass along the corridor: for that it *was* he whose appearance had so much alarmed her, she had not now the slightest doubt.

We have said that M. Volney tore his inanimate daughter with frenzied violence from the arms of the Viscount Delorme; and the anguished father was bearing her towards her own chamber, when the young nobleman sprang forward, and catching him by the arm, exclaimed in a quick excited tone, "I know what is uppermost in your mind ——but by heaven! you are wrong—and I can prove it!"

Clarine now suddenly regained her senses. For a moment her eyes swept their looks wildly around: but instantaneously comprehending everything that had passed, she threw herself at her father's feet, stretching her clasped hands towards him, and crying, "Pardon! pardon!"

M. Volney pressed his hand in anguish to his brow; and Zoe even fancied that a sob came from his lips.

"Yes—by her side do I kneel," said the Viscount Delorme: "by the side of this beloved one do I place myself—likewise to implore your pardon!"

"Rise—rise!" exclaimed M. Volney: "rise, I

command—I entreat you! And follow me hither. —Lady Octavian," he added, perceiving that Zoe was about to retire to her own chamber from motives of delicacy, "have the goodness to accompany us: for as you have seen so much, you may be a witness of all the rest!"

M. Volney led the way into the drawing-room, followed by the Viscount and Clarine: while Zoe, after a few instants' hesitation, entered likewise. Clarine now threw herself in Lady Octavian's arms, and wept convulsively upon her bosom.

"M. Volney," said Alfred Delorme, hastening forwards and addressing Clarine's father in a low but quick and earnest voice, "I beseech you to give utterance to the word—the one word of consent—which may spare your daughter so much misery! Say it, sir, I entreat you! The horrible suspicion you entertained is wholly unfounded—— and I repeat I can prove it!"

"Prove it? It is impossible!" said M. Volney, trembling all over with a deep concentrated excitement. "But even if you *could*, there are reasons —reasons——" and he gasped for breath.

"No, no, M. Volney," exclaimed Alfred: "you will not be implacable towards the son for his father's crimes! As for the proof, it is here—— I have it——Pardon me for showing you a document only too well calculated to renew the affliction and the bitterness of past miseries! But it is absolutely necessary you should so far control your feelings as to peruse this letter."

Thus speaking, the Viscount Delorme handed M. Volney a paper which he had hastily drawn forth from a pocket-book; and then he turned towards Clarine who was now regaining some little command over her own feelings—thanks to the kind and encouraging words that Zoe was murmuring in her ears.

"Oh, Alfred! dearest Alfred!" whispered Clarine to her lover; "how could you possibly have been guilty of this imprudence after the letter which I wrote you declaring that we must separate for ever?"

"And think you that I could consent thus to separate?" responded the Viscount, in that low voice of tenderness which likewise being half-reproachful, was sufficient to convince Zoe of the depth and sincerity of the love that he entertained for her friend Clarine. "Why did I again seek an interview with you? It was to assure you of the existence of a proof that your father's fearful suspicion is utterly unfounded—and that proof is now in the hands of M. Volney. Behold—he is reading it!"

M. Volney had his back turned towards his daughter, the Viscount, and Zoe: he was bending down towards the chamber-light which he had placed upon the drawing-room table: he was holding the open letter in his hand: but whatsoever feelings might be depicted upon his countenance, could not be discerned by those from whom that countenance was thus averted. Zoe comprehended full well that the letter which the Viscount Delorme had placed in M. Volney's hands, contained some proof that he might with certitude regard Clarine as his own daughter and not the offspring of her mother's illicit amour with the late Viscount. She comprehended likewise that a proper delicacy of feeling had prevented Alfred Delorme from being more explicit in his whispered assurances to Clarine relative to the precise nature of that document.

"God be at least thanked for *this!*" was the ejaculation which suddenly burst from M. Volney's lips: and hastening towards Clarine, he folded her in his arms.

The young lady—perfectly well comprehending that her father was convinced by the weight of the evidence, whatsoever it were, that the letter contained — wound her arms about his neck and sobbed and wept upon his breast. But she sobbed and wept for joy at the thought that the hideous suspicion which her sire had entertained in respect to herself, was cleared up, and that he could now indeed embrace her with the confidence that it was his own lawfully-begotten child whom he was thus folding in his arms. Some words murmuringly uttered came from Clarine's lips; and as they struck her father's ear, they were to him a revelation.

"What! Clarine," he exclaimed; "you comprehend the meaning of all this? You know what suspicion——"

"Yes—I know it, dear father!" murmured his daughter; "I know more than you fancy—and I know everything!"

"Everything?" ejaculated M. Volney with a sudden start, and also with a frightened look sweeping over his countenance. "No, no! it is impossible! Heaven forbid!"—and he shuddered visibly.

"Forgive me, dearest father," said Clarine; and once more she sank upon her knees at his feet.

"What—what is it that you know?" he demanded: and there was something almost fierce in his accents, his looks, and his manner: "what is it that you know? But I am mad—it is impossible!"—and pressing his hand, with a renewal of wild anguish, to his brow, he seemed as if he sought to steady his confused and bewildered ideas.

"I know, dearest father," responded Clarine, frightened by the vehemence of his manner, "the source of all your distresses——And, Oh! bitterly, bitterly have I wept on account of the fall of her whose memory I had tutored myself to love and revere!"

"And who told you all this?" demanded M. Volney abruptly.

"It was the Viscount who told me part, and Marguerite who told me the rest. Oh! blame me not, dearest father," continued Clarine entreatingly: "I feel that I have done wrong in some respects——but if you had not left me so much to myself——"

"Rise, child—rise!" said M. Volney, whose heart was evidently lacerated with a world of conflicting and tumultuous emotions. "It is I who am to blame!—it is I—and not you, my poor child!"

Clarine rose from her suppliant posture: Alfred Delorme stepped forward, and said, "M. Volney, will you not now speak that *one* word of assent which will make us both happy? I have always heard you spoken of as a just, a good, and an upright man——"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Volney with a renewed fierceness of tone and look. "This scene can last no longer—at least not for the present!

Depart, Alfred Delorme—and to-morrow you shall know my decision! Depart, I say!" added M. Volney vehemently: "not another word to me nor to my daughter!—and to-morrow, I repeat, you may come to me——Yes, you may call at the Chateau——and then my decision shall be made known!"

"Oh! let me entreat you," said the Viscount in a voice of the most earnest appeal, "to stifle those feelings of hatred which you have hitherto entertained towards me——"

"Young man, you comprehend me not!" interrupted Clarine's father petulantly: "you cannot penetrate into the depths of my heart! Oh, if you could——But enough! You will perhaps know more to-morrow. Depart——I conjure, I command you!"

"It is not for me," responded the Viscount, "who am an honourable suitor for your daughter's hand——aye, and a suppliant for your consent and good feeling——it is not for me, I say, to oppose your will or rebel against your mandate."

With these words Alfred Delorme bowed with courteous respect to M. Volney: he saluted Zoe in a similar manner: he bent a look of loving tenderness on Clarine; and he quitted the room. For some minutes after his departure M. Volney paced to and fro with agitated steps,—apparently unconscious of the presence of his daughter and Zoe. These two remained together,—Clarine with her arm thrown round her friend's waist—clinging to her with the confidence of one who sought support, solace, and encouragement in the painful state of uncertainty in which the last scene of this strangely wild drama had left her.

At length M. Volney accosted the two ladies; and he said to Clarine, "Sit down, and tell me frankly and faithfully everything that has taken place between yourself and the Viscount——all that you have heard from *his* lips—all that you have heard from the lips of old Marguerite likewise. Stay, Lady Octavian!—I beseech you not to leave us! We look upon you as something more than a friend: my daughter regards you as a sister——and if it be not forcing our affairs upon your attention——"

"Rest assured, M. Volney," replied Lady Octavian Meredith, "that if I were about to quit the room, it was only through motives of delicacy. But if, on the other hand, I can be of the slightest service——"

"You can! you can!" interjected M. Volney, with hasty emphasis.

"Perhaps it may be as well to mention," said Zoe, "that I am already partially the confidante of my friend Clarine. This very morning was she telling me the history of her acquaintance and her love for him whom she then mentioned as Claude Masson, and whom I have this evening for the first time known to be the Viscount Delorme."

"And you would have known everything, dearest Zoe," said Clarine gently, "had we not been interrupted. But my dear father," she continued, turning towards her parent, "with all candour and frankness will I now reveal everything that has taken place. Yet you will chide me——"

"No, I will not chide you, Clarine," said M. Volney: "for there was only too much truth in your words when you declared that I had left you so continuously to your own pursuits."

"Think not for an instant that I intended it as a reproach!" exclaimed Clarine earnestly.

"No, no—I took it not as such," answered M. Volney with kindness: "it was the ingenuous plea on your own behalf which would naturally flow from your lips under such circumstances."

Having thus spoken, M. Volney sate down with the air of one who intended to listen patiently to a narrative which he had asked for. Clarine and Zoe likewise seated themselves; and then the former commenced her explanations. She recited everything she had already stated to Lady Octavian in respect to the incidents which had first thrown her in the way of him who had passed himself off as Claude Masson; and she then continued the thread of her history in the following manner:—

"You, my dear Zoe, arrived at the Chateau some few weeks back; and we speedily became intimate together. You were the companion of my walks: there was no opportunity for me any longer to meet him whom I loved. During this interruption of my intercourse with him, the idea would often steal into my mind that it was perhaps all for the best—and that heaven itself had sent you hither to check me in a career of imprudence with regard to myself and of deceit towards my father. Nevertheless, even while making these reflections, I felt that I loved Claude Masson—as I then believed his name to be—with an affection that could never change; and I consoled myself with the hope that as he loved me with an equal sincerity, he would fulfil his promise of revealing himself to you, my father, the moment the influential friends of whom he had spoken should have rescued him from the perils which he represented as environing himself. One day—when you, dear Zoe, were somewhat indisposed—I repaired to the village to make certain purchases; and on my way homeward I encountered him who was indeed uppermost in my thoughts at the time. Three weeks had passed since last we met: and though I explained to him the cause——indeed, he was already aware of it, for he had seen you and me, Zoe, walking together in the neighbourhood——yet did he somewhat reproach me for what he termed my unwillingness to make an effort to steal forth and meet him at least once during that interval. I was profoundly afflicted by the language which he thus held towards me; and he implored my forgiveness for having wounded my feelings. He said that in a short time he should be in a position to throw off the mask of concealment and openly come forward to claim my hand. He besought that I would now and then grant him an interview. It was in vain that I urged the impossibility of walking forth by myself, now that I had a companion. He was deeply distressed: he spoke despondingly: he declared that such was his affection for me, that he could not endure another long interval of separation. In a word, dear father——but you have promised not to chide me?—for oh! the Viscount is the most loving, the most high-minded, and the most honourable of men——"

"I will not chide you, Clarine," said M. Volney with exceeding gentleness of manner. "Proceed. Shall I help you to that avowal which you hesitate to make?"

"No, father," responded Clarine, almost proudly. "Heaven be thanked! I can look you in the face and declare that——"

"Enough, Clarine!" interrupted M. Volney: and then he emphatically added, "Not for a single instant did I suspect the honour or purity of my child. Proceed, Clarine. You consented to grant your admirer an occasional interview within the walls of this Chateau?"

"Yes—in the chapel," responded Clarine. "I furnished him with the key of the door at the bottom of the staircase at the extremity of the passage; and on four or five occasions did I meet him for a few minutes in the chapel. Rest assured that I should not have for an instant granted these stolen interviews within the sanctity of your dwelling—nor at such an hour, after the household had retired to rest—no, not even in compliance with his earnest pleadings should I have granted these interviews—were it not that I was deeply, deeply anxious to learn the progress of those intercessions which his friends, as I believed at the time, were making on his behalf in Paris. I now come to a very memorable moment of my existence. It was the evening before last that I again met Claude Masson—as I still believed his name to be—in the chapel. He told me that he began to fear our interviews could no longer be snatched thus stealthily—for that he had seen you, dear Zoe, crossing the passage on the previous night as he was hastening towards the staircase at the extremity. He then asked me if I were prepared for a revelation which he was resolved to make, and which could no longer be withheld? I was frightened: I besought him to be caudid with me at once. He then said that he must tell me a narrative of the past, of which, as he had discovered, I was hitherto completely ignorant. Without immediately revealing himself, he told me how a certain Viscount Delorme had proved the author of your wretchedness, my dear father——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted M. Volney, with an anguished look: "I can understand full well all that he told you!"

"And then he concluded," added Clarine, herself deeply afflicted at being compelled to make allusions which thus planted fresh daggers in her parent's heart—"and then he concluded by revealing himself to me as Alfred Delorme!"

There was a brief pause—during which M. Volney guarded a profound silence; and Clarine then resumed her narrative in the following manner:—

"Alfred explained to me all the motives of his recent conduct. He said that some five or six years ago he called privately upon you, my dear father, at Fontainebleau, to make you acquainted with the elucidation of the mystery which had previously shrouded his own father's fate; and at the same time he entertained the hope that as so terrible a retribution had overtaken the author of your wrongs, amidst the drifting snows of the Alpine regions, you would not refuse to give your hand in forgiveness, if not in friendship, to himself as the living representative of the perished Viscount. But you *did* refuse!—and Alfred left you with sadness and sorrow in his heart. A few years passed away—during which he travelled in foreign countries; and after a while he visited Spain. He took it into his head to perform a pedestrian tour across the Pyrenees and through the South of France. It was while thus engaged that he arrived a few months back in this neighbourhood. Observing the old Chateau, his curiosity dictated certain inquiries; and he learnt to his astonishment that it was inhabited by a gentleman named Volney, and who had an only daughter. He therefore at once felt convinced that the present tenant of the Chateau must be yourself. He wandered in the vicinage of the house: he caught a glimpse of you in the distance—he beheld me likewise. Often and often," continued the blushing Clarine, "has he breathed the assurance in my ear that the first moment he saw me, he was smitten with a feeling which has since ripened into love. Accident rendered him my deliverer at the precipice of the ravine, as I have already told you; and from that instant he resolved to woo me as his future bride. But he dared not *then* reveal himself to you: he thought that if his love were reciprocated, and if he could win my heart, you would not stand in the way of your daughter's happiness. He saw the necessity of devising some tale to account for his earnestly expressed desire that I should remain silent in respect to the presence of such an individual in the neighbourhood: and therefore, when I pressed him to declare who he was, he adopted the first name which entered his head at the moment. The story of his political perils was a venial fabrication to suit his purposes for the time, to lull my suspicions, and to satisfy my mind. Such were the explanations which the Viscount Delorme gave me the night before last, when I met him in the chapel. You may conceive the feelings with which I listened to all that he then told me: but before I had time to learn what his intentions were, and how he meant to proceed towards yourself, dear father,—the door of the chapel opened and Marguerite made her appearance! I may as well observe, in order to avoid the interruption of my narrative hereafter, that Marguerite (as I learnt that same night, for I knew it not before) was in the habit of occasionally visiting the chapel to say her prayers: for, as you are aware, dear father, her piety borders upon superstition."

"And Marguerite thus surprised you," said M. Volney, "with Alfred Delorme?"

"Yes: and she was more than astonished—she was more than startled: she was horrified!" continued Clarine. "She insisted that the Viscount should at once take his departure. Vainly did he entreat, plead, and remonstrate: Marguerite was resolute; and she vowed that if he departed not at once, she would unhesitatingly make known his presence to you. All the favour that he could obtain was a permission to return on the following evening to explain those intentions which he was about to make known to me at the instant Marguerite so unexpectedly appeared. He went away; and I was left alone with Marguerite. She then began to upbraid me bitterly for what she termed the wickedness of my conduct. I besought her not to speak so harshly: the tears were streaming down my cheeks: she relented—and she embraced me. But she bade me discard the image of Alfred Delorme from my heart: she told me it was criminal to love him—for that you, my dear father, entertained the horrible suspicion——But I will not more directly allude to it! Suffice it to say that

I myself was horrified. I consented—yes, willingly consented, to abide by the dictates of Marguerite's guidance; and she bade me pen a letter to Alfred Delorme, to the effect that everything must be considered to be at an end between us. On this condition—and on this condition only—would she agree to place upon her lips the seal of silence in respect to what had occurred. I penned that letter—yesterday morning I gave it to Marguerite; and last night she left it in the chapel, so that when Alfred Delorme should penetrate thither he might find it. She herself chose not to have an interview with him: she deemed it useless to learn what *had been* his intentions, inasmuch as she felt the impossibility of their being carried out."

"And it was after all Alfred Delorme," said M. Volney, "whom I saw last night stealing along the passage! It was he, too, whom your ladyship"—addressing himself to Zoe—"on two occasions beheld!"

"And now, my dear father," continued Clarine, not pausing to ask a question nor make a comment in respect to the words which M. Volney had just uttered,—"*can* you pardon me for all that I have done? Oh! you know not how my heart was rent when in your study you delivered that solemn injunction in respect to Alfred Delorme! I longed to throw myself at your feet and confess everything: but I dared not! Again I ask, *can* you forgive me?"

"Yes, my dear child—I forgive you!" exclaimed her father: "from the very bottom of my heart do I forgive you!"

Clarine threw herself into her sire's arms; and for several minutes she remained clasped there, weeping upon his breast—and he himself weeping over her. The scene was full of an exquisite pathos: and Zoe was profoundly affected.

"Retire, my love—retire to your own chamber," said M. Volney at length; and then he added with accents of deepest fervour, "And may heaven bless you!"

"But have you nothing more to say to me, dear father?" inquired Clarine, upturning her looks towards M. Volney's countenance, and with an expression of half-surprise, half-affliction on her features. "Will you not put me out of all suspense——"

"Listen, Clarine!" interrupted her father, who after an instant's air of anguish, suddenly appeared to nerve himself with the fortitude requisite for the utterance of an inflexible decision. "You may as well know the worst at once, and be relieved of all suspense. Clarine, my poor girl—doubly dear to me since that horrible suspicion has been banished from my mind!—your union with the Viscount Delorme is an impossibility. God help thee, my poor child!"

These last words were spoken with the tremulous accents of deepest emotion; and they were followed by a sob which seemed to convulse M. Volney's breast. Clarine bent upon him a look full of unutterable misery; and then she fell senseless in the arms of Lady Octavian. M. Volney, half distracted, flew to fetch restoratives; and when he perceived that his unhappy daughter was slowly returning to consciousness, he pressed Zoe's hand with nervous violence,—saying, "I cannot wait till she is completely restored! For heaven's sake soothe—console—strengthen her! But remember, Lady Octavian—remember!—that decision of mine is inflexible!"

And with these words M. Volney rushed from the room.

CHAPTER CVI.

THE ALPINE TRAGEDY.

It was after breakfast on the following morning—a meal however at which Clarine was not present, and of which neither M. Volney nor Zoe scarcely partook—that he requested her ladyship to join him presently in his study, as he wished to speak to her on matters of the utmost importance. Zoe hastened first of all to see whether her ministrations were required by Clarine, who was ill in bed; and in about a quarter of an hour she repaired to the study. She found M. Volney pacing to and fro, not with a visible excitement and agitation—but in a slow solemn manner, and with a deep dejection of the looks. He placed a chair for Lady Octavian's accommodation: he then sate down at his desk; and he said in a mournful voice, "How fares my daughter now?"

"My opinion is still the same, M. Volney," answered Zoe. "As I told you the instant we met at the breakfast-table, Clarine has received a shock which she will never recover—unless joyous intelligence be speedily conveyed to her. She will die of a broken heart, M. Volney: for all her happiness is centered in her love for Alfred Delorme!"

The pallor which already overspread the French gentleman's countenance, deepened into ghastliness: it was a paleness like that of the dead: it appeared as if all the vital blood had suddenly quitted his body. Even his lips became ashy white: a fearful struggle was evidently taking place within him. In a few moments he rose from his seat—opened the door of the study—and looked forth into the passage with which it communicated. Satisfied that no one was there, he closed the outer door carefully: then he shut an inner door, which was covered with green baize and which usually stood open.

"Be not alarmed, Lady Octavian, at these precautions," he said, slowly returning to his seat: "but I am about to speak to you on a subject for which there must be no listeners."

If Zoe were not exactly alarmed, she nevertheless felt a chill strike glacially to her heart: for there was something so fearful in M. Volney's looks at the moment—something so full of ghastly horror, that it was only too well calculated to produce this effect. He resumed his seat: he drew his chair closer towards her: and he said in a voice which had now changed from a deep mournfulness to a sepulchral hollowness, "That which I am about to tell you, has never yet been breathed to mortal ears; and from your lips must it never go forth again. I need your advice in the awful dilemma in which I am placed: I feel myself totally unable to act according to the guidance of my own soul's promptings. Strong as my mind has hitherto been, the incidents which are now passing have reduced it to a more than childhood's weakness. You, Lady Octavian, have shown your-

self so good, so kind, so affectionate towards my daughter—you possess too so much sterling sense—that I readily leave myself in your hands. But in order that you may be enabled to assist me with your judgment and direct my proceedings, I must tell you everything."

M. Volney paused: Zoe had no reply to make—at least not for the present: but she waited with intensest curiosity, and also with a solemn feeling of interest, for the explanations that were to come.

"First of all," resumed M. Volney, "let me inform you of the nature of that letter which Alfred Delorme placed in my hand last night. It was a letter written by my wretched wife to Alfred's father: it was after the birth of my daughter—and by its tenour it fully proved that although they had for some time loved each other with that illicit, fatal affection of their's, yet that it was only a few days prior to the writing of that letter that their love had become downright criminal. Yes—the evidence that such is the fact is incontrovertible; and therefore was I enabled last night to embrace Clarine for the first time with the conviction that in her I was veritably embracing a daughter! And thus, too, the barrier which my hideous suspicion had raised up against the possibility of an alliance between herself and Alfred Delorme, has ceased to exist: but there is another—*another*," added M. Volney, with difficulty suppressing a burst of anguish,—"unless indeed by your judgment and under your guidance, Lady Octavian, it can be surmounted."

"And this other barrier?" said Zoe, still in a state of deep and solemn suspense.

"Listen to me," said M. Volney; "and I will tell you a tale which you can little expect to hear. You are already sufficiently acquainted with past events to enable me to take up my narrative from a particular point without any prefatory details. I therefore wish to direct your attention to that period—that fatal period—when I suddenly discovered my wife's infidelity. She died of a broken heart,—overwhelmed with shame and disgrace,—as you have heard. The Viscount Delorme—that false friend who became the author of so much misery—fled to avoid my vengeance: for I sent a friend to provoke him to a mortal duel—a duel in which I had resolved that one if not both should perish. But my mind was made up: I was determined to have vengeance: nothing but the blood of that man could appease my furiously excited passions! Heaven knows that up to that instant my character had never displayed itself in a ferocious light—my disposition had never developed savage instincts. But I had experienced a wrong so stupendous that only an adequate vengeance could give rest to my perturbed and excited spirit. At least such was my idea. By some means, which I need not now pause to describe, I got upon the Viscount's track—and I at once pretexted an inclination for a change of residence to an Italian clime. I took my infant daughter and Marguerite with me. Oh, often and often did I wonder within myself wherefore I entertained the least love for that child, and wherefore I did not cast her forth from me as the possible offspring of that illicit love which had dishonoured me. But when I looked upon Clarine's innocent countenance, there was a yearning tenderness in my heart which at least forbade me from being unkind to the babe even if my soul did not absolutely cleave to it. It was the voice of nature whispering, though faintly, within me: for last night has proven that she is indeed my daughter! Good God, if I had discarded the child—if I had repudiated her!—Oh, what guilt! what sorrow! But, thank heaven, of *that* crime I am innocent!"

A look of grateful fervour, as these last words were uttered, succeeded the strong shudder with which the immediate previous ones were spoken; and Zoe herself shuddered—for she had a presentiment that her ears were about to drink in some terrible revelation.

"Yes—I undertook that journey," continued M. Volney, after a pause; "and at every halting-place I secretly but diligently instituted those inquiries which enabled me to follow up the clue that I had originally obtained. Marguerite fancied that it was my unsettled mind which caused me thus to wander forth for long hours together: but it was in reality for the purpose of making the inquiries to which I have just alluded. At length the intelligence I received led me to Mount St. Bernard—that portion of the Alpine range which overlooks sunny Italy. We reached the Hospice: but now all clue to the Viscount Delormo seemed suddenly lost. He had not visited the Hospice; and yet I had the positive certainty that he had commenced the ascent of the mountain. I wandered about for hours and hours together in that dangerous region of snows and glaciers; and the faithful Marguerite was more than ever frightened on my account. Yes—I dared a thousand perils while hunting a man on those Alpine heights with as much tenacity of purpose as ever the hardy mountaineer displayed in chasing the chamois. Thus several days passed; and at length one forenoon, amidst an almost blinding sleet, I beheld a single horseman toiling up a steep slope. It was he—my mortal enemy—the object of my search—the man whom I was hunting—the Viscount Delorme!"

"M. Volney," said Zoe, shuddering, and with a countenance pale as death, "tell me no more—I beseech you to tell me no more! I dare not anticipate what the rest of your narrative might be: but it seems as if I had already heard too much!"

"Lady Octavian," said the French gentleman, in a voice that was scarcely audible, "I beseech you to hear the rest! You must know everything—or else you will be unable to assist me with your judgment. Nothing must be concealed from you—nothing withheld. If you were left to conjecture, it might fall short of the terrible, the astounding truth! Besides," added M. Volney, "a few words—a very few words will explain the rest—and these words shall be quickly said."

"No, no!" gasped Zoe: but her accents were even less audible than those in which the Frenchman had just been speaking.

"It was amidst that cloud of beating sleet, mingled with snow-flakes," continued M. Volney, heedless of Lady Octavian's weak and feeble interruption, "that the horseman advanced. I stood with my back towards him until he was on a level with me: then in consequence of the suddenness with which I turned towards him, his horse started, shied, and flung the Viscount from his back. The scene was terrible. The animal reared

—fell back upon its haunches—and slipping with its hinder hoofs, was in an instant over the precipice. The fearful cry which it sent up from the tremendous depth into which it was plunging down, was like the voices of a dozen human beings all concentrated in the horrible concord of one wild terrific yell of agony. At the same instant my knee was upon the breast of Delorme—my hand grasped his throat. The rage of ten thousand fiends was boiling in the hell of my soul: there was the strength of an iron vice in the fingers that were tightening about my enemy's neck. Desperate were his struggles: but he had no more chance in contending with me, than if he were an infant in the hands of a giant. And yet naturally he was far stronger than I—more powerful of form—more vigorous of arm and limb. For it was the raging pandemonium of my vindictive fury that rendered me at the time invincible—irresistible—dominant,—and which gave me the strength of ten thousand. A few moments, and I started up with a revulsion of unutterable horror in my soul: for that vice-like gripe of mine had only relaxed its hold upon the Viscount's throat when the last breath and sigh of life had come gurgling from his lips. He was a corpse and I—I, Lady Octavian Meredith, stood there, amidst that wild Alpine scene, a branded murderer!"

Zoe gazed, with a ghastly terror and a horror-stricken stupefaction of the feelings, upon the equally ghastly face of M. Volney. She was transfixed to her seat: she seemed turned into a statue: all the blood had curdled in her veins. Her lips were apart—but no breath came through them—it was held in awful suspense: her bosom remained upheaved, as if it would never sink with respiration again.

"And now, Lady Octavian," continued M. Volney, still in a hollow voice, "you know my fearful

secret. I have not shrunk from trusting you with it: I know that you will not betray me. It was a vengeance which I wreaked; and though before I perpetrated the deed I considered myself justified in seeking the deadliest revenge for my outraged honour and my wrecked happiness—though all the world too would hold that I was thus justified—yet frankly do I confess that my conscience has reproached me ever since the moment that I stood a murderer amidst that wild Alpine scenery! Nevertheless, I repeat, I know that you will not betray me. But let me continue——I have only a few more words to say. I took from the person of the Viscount whatsoever papers might prove his identity; and I dragged the corpse to a spot where I saw that the drifting snow was accumulating fast. In a few minutes the body of the Viscount was completely enveloped in the winding-sheet which nature's hand wove in countless myriads of flakes around it;—and I knew that my secret was safe. And so it proved. Several years elapsed ere the corpse was disinterred from its mausoleum of snow by one of the dogs of the Hospice; and several more years elapsed ere the Marchioness and Alfred were led to the elucidation of the lost Viscount's fate. Alfred came to me at Fontainebleau to report the discovery—to entreat my forgiveness towards his father's memory—and to beseech that there might be reconciliation between the two families; for he said that if I received him with rancour, he should feel as if his father's sins were being visited anathematizingly upon himself. I saw that the young man suspected not his sire had met his death otherwise than by an accident which often overtakes travellers amidst the Alpine mountains;—but yet I was alarmed! Conscience, Lady Octavian," added M. Volney in a solemn tone, "makes cowards of us all!"

There was another brief pause—a pause which Zoe could not interrupt; for she was still a prey to almost overwhelming feelings: but the French gentleman soon continued in the following strain:—

"I refused to give the hand of friendship to Alfred Delorme. It was not, Lady Octavian, because I in reality visited upon himself the sins of his father: it was because I could not bear the idea of meeting, much less encouraging the visits of one whose presence would continuously remind me that his sire had met his death at my hand. And then too, the horrible suspicion existed in my mind that the same blood which flowed in the veins of Alfred Delorme might also flow in the veins of Clarine; and I recoiled in consternation from the idea that it was possible for them to become enamoured of each other. Thus, in order to rid myself of Alfred Delorme—in the hope of preventing him from seeking me out for the future—I roughly and rudely repelled his conciliatory overtures. I assumed the air and speech of vindictiveness: I sent him away saddened and dejected. And then I lost no time in abandoning my home and taking Clarine with me—it being my intention to bury ourselves in some deep solitude. It was amongst the Pyrenean regions or the wilds of Catalonia that I thought of settling our future abode: but on reaching the adjacent village and on beholding this Chateau, I conceived the place and neighbourhood to be sufficiently suited for my purpose. It has however pleased heaven to direct the footsteps of Alfred Delorme hither; and that which I had done so much to avoid—that which I have so much striven to prevent, has taken place. They have met—and they love each other!"

There was another brief pause: and then M. Volney concluded thus:—

"One tremendous barrier has been broken down: it ceases to exist. That letter, which Alfred Delorme must doubtless have found amongst his deceased father's papers, when taking possession of his ancestral home—or which might have been in possession of the Marchioness who so tenderly reared him—has convinced me that my wife became not completely criminal until after the birth of Clarine. *That* barrier therefore is destroyed. But how can I recognise Alfred Delorme as my son-in-law?—how can I extend the hand of friendship towards him—that hand which took his father's life! Counsel—advise me, Lady Octavian. I pledge myself to fulfil your injunctions, whatever they may be! But as for that terrible secret of mine——"

"It is safe, M. Volney—it is safe with me," replied Zoe, in a low voice of deep solemnity. "You will not expect me to offer any comment upon that terrible portion of your narrative. But in respect to Clarine—in respect to the Viscount—I can have no hesitation in offering an opinion. If you insist upon severing them, you will be sacrificing their happiness to the sense of——"

"I understand you, Lady Octavian!" said M. Volney: "to the sense of my own guilt! Yes, yes—it is so! I must not be selfish!"

"No, M. Volney," observed Lady Octavian impressively; "there must be the completest self-abnegation on your part——"

"There shall be—there shall be!" responded the French gentleman. "Poor Clarine! she has already been made too much the victim of my own wretched destiny!"

He rose from his seat, and paced the room for a few instants with agitated steps: his form was bowed—he looked ten years older than he had seemed on the preceding day.

"Yes—they shall be united!" he said, suddenly stopping short in front of Lady Octavian. "Hasten and convey this intelligence to Clarine. The bridal shall take place soon; and afterwards—afterwards," added M. Volney, "I will seek some foreign country—there to dwell for the remainder of my life!"

Zoe could not help compassionating the unhappy man whose crime had arisen from a sense of deepest wrong; and when she issued from his presence, she felt that the tears were streaming down her cheeks. Having composed her feelings somewhat, she sped to Clarine's chamber; and to that young lady did she impart the happy intelligence which she had to convey. We need scarcely add that Zoe respected M. Volney's secret, terrible though it were. Joy—indescribable joy expanded upon Clarine's countenance: the sense of indisposition vanished; and she hastened to apparel herself that she might welcome her lover when he should come, according to appointment, to learn M. Volney's decision.

CHAPTER CVII.

THE DISGUISED ONE.

It was evening—a beautiful evening in the middle of September; and a gentle breeze had succeeded the heat of a day of more than usual sultriness for that period of the year. Queen Indora was walking in the garden attached to her beautiful villa in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill and Bayswater: she was alone, and reflecting upon the incidents of her past life. The purple which blended with the other hues of her garments, indicated that she was in mourning. Her dress was half European, half oriental. She wore the flowing skirt belonging to the feminine garb of the former style: a species of caftan, and the undergarment developing the rich proportions of her bust, were of the Eastern fashion. The jetty masses of her hair hung far down her back, below her waist, and seemed like a thick ebon veil which might be drawn at will over the countenance.

There was a certain degree of pensiveness expressed in the looks of the Queen, which was not however altogether sorrowful. Subjects for mourning and rejoicing were blending in her thoughts: on one side was her father's death—on the other the assurance which she had received from Clement Redcliffe that he would accept her hand. Still Indora was thoughtful: she walked with a slow pace; and when reaching a fountain in the midst of the garden, she stood there gazing upon the flow of the crystal water, and giving way to the reflections that were uppermost in her mind.

From amidst a knot of trees an ominous countenance was surveying her. Without preserving any unnecessary mystery in the present instance, we will at once declare that the individual thus concealed was none other than Barney the Burker. Nothing could be more admirable than the fellow's disguise—nothing more complete than his transmogrification, so to speak. He wore the wig with frizzly curls which the Duke of Marchmont had given him: his countenance was stained duskily with the dye which he had obtained from the same source: he wore spectacles; and a large overhanging moustache concealed the malformation of his upper lip. In respect to apparel, the Burker had a very decent appearance; and he no longer retained the huge club which was wont to be his almost inseparable companion. In this disguise was it that Barney had dared to come up to London; and now for the first time he had penetrated into the grounds of the villa where Queen Indora dwelt.

Little suspected the oriental lady that she was in the close vicinage of one who harboured such evil designs towards her: little likewise did she imagine that the power of her beauty was at that instant exercising its influence over the soul of one of the greatest miscreants in all Christendom. And yet such was the case. The Burker—whose disposition was naturally of a brutal callousness, and who of all men in the world was the least susceptible of a sentiment that could interfere with any business that he had on hand—was now suddenly smitten with a feeling hitherto unknown. It appeared to him as if he had never rightly until this minute comprehended what female beauty was: but now he began to understand what was meant by regular and well chiselled features—by eyes of splendid lustre—by nobly arching brows that gave intelligence and lofty frankness to the countenance—by the magnificent symmetry of shape—and by the blending of all that elegance, gracefulness, and dignity which combined to render Indora at once the fascinating and the queen-like woman she was. Yes—all this did the Burker begin to appreciate; and the brutal ruffianism of his nature was melting under the influence of that supernal loveliness which he was now surveying. Indeed, the eastern lady appeared to him something more than woman: she looked as if she were a goddess: there was something about her which not merely charmed—it likewise overawed; and there was a moment when the miscreant almost felt as if he could rush forth from his ambush, throw himself at her feet, and implore her pardon!

Indora passed away from the vicinage of the fountain; and as the Burker followed with his eyes her slowly retreating form, he thought to himself that never had he before been struck by the beauty which exists in a woman's faultless shape. These hitherto unknown feelings expanded and strengthened within him; and it seemed as if he had suddenly become altogether a different being from what he was. Indora disappeared in a turning of the gravel-walk; and then the Burker asked himself, "What the devil is all this that has come over me? I feel just like a child. I suppose it must be because I havn't got my club as usual; and I'm like a lion without his teeth and claws. And yet that lady *is* uncommon beautiful! I never thought so much before of what a woman's good looks might be."

Here Indora reappeared to the Burker's view: he left off communing with himself—his gaze was once more riveted upon her. As she drew nearer, he beheld an expression of ineffable sadness pass over her countenance: she was thinking of her late father, and the tears trickled down her cheeks. She raised her kerchief to wipe them away; and the Burker was struck by the exquisite modelling of her hand and of as much of the arm as the sleeve of the caftan suffered to be visible. Then she thought of Clement Redcliffe; and a sweet smile played upon her lips, revealing a glimpse of the teeth of ivory whiteness. The Burker literally quivered at the strangeness of these new feelings which had come over him; and again was he on the point of rushing forth and imploring the lady's pardon for the design which he had entertained towards her. But he checked himself: for at the instant his ear caught other footsteps advancing along a neighbouring gravel-walk.

It was Sagoonah, who sought her mistress; and now the Burker beheld that splendid Hindoo woman the dark grandeur of whose beauty was of so high an order, and whose lithe form was of so bayadere a symmetry. The Burker was astonished at the spectacle of this new personification of another style of feminine charms: and as the two walked away together, he followed them with his gaze. But as in his own mind he endeavoured to establish a choice between them, it settled upon Indora. Yet was the rude, brutal heart of this man who was stained with a thousand crimes, and

himself a monster of ugliness—deeply touched by both the specimens of oriental beauty which he had thus seen.

"You seek me, my Sagoonah," said Queen Indora, as they slowly walked away from the fountain: "have you any thing to communicate?"

"No, my lady," answered the ayah: "but you gave me permission to join you occasionally when you were alone——"

"Yes, my faithful Sagoonah," rejoined the Queen: "because I have fancied that for the last few days you have been pensive and mournful—or that at least you have had strange fits of abstraction——"

"Oh, no, my lady!" said Sagoonah, lifting her large dark eyes with an air of the most ingenuous candour towards Indora's countenance. "I can assure you that it is not so!—I have already given your ladyship that same assurance!"

"I am glad to hear you repeat it, Sagoonah," remarked the Queen; "because you know that I experience an affection for you. You have served me so truly and faithfully!——But tell me, Sagoonah," asked Indora, thus suddenly interrupting herself, "shall you be glad soon to return to your own native country?"

"I am always happy where your ladyship is," replied the ayah.

"And you will go back, my Sagoonah," proceeded the Queen, now smiling good-naturedly and with a caressing manner,—"you will go back without having lost your heart to any native of this metropolis?"

Sagoonah stooped suddenly down to pluck a flower that grew on the edge of the border which Indora and herself were passing at the time; and then she looked up into the countenance of her mistress with the same ingenuously frank expression as before. For an instant Indora was smitten with a suspicion—on account of the incident of the flower, which had a sort of petulance in it—that the words she had used in good-humoured jocularity had really touched a chord vibrating in the ayah's heart: but this idea quickly vanished when Sagoonah thus gazed up at her in so candid a manner.

"Yes, my faithful dependant," continued the Queen, "I know that you will rejoice to return to your native land; and the time is not far distant when we shall set off thither. And we shall not go alone, my dear Sagoonah," proceeded Indora, a blush now suffusing the delicate duskiness of her complexion: "I have already given you to understand——"

At this instant the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Christian and Christina, who were advancing along the gravel-walk—for our young hero had been passing the day at the villa. Sagoonah retired: but as she slowly walked back towards the villa, brilliant fires flashed forth from her eyes—and the Burker, as she passed close by the spot where he still lay in ambush, was suddenly seized with amazement—yes, and even with a wild unknown terror as he beheld the lightnings of those burning orbs. Shortly afterwards Queen Indora re-entered the villa in company with Christian and Christina; and then the Burker, stealing forth from the grounds, betook himself slowly towards the main road,—wondering at the strange feelings which had come over him and which had paralyzed his arm at the very instant Indora seemed to be in his power.

But notwithstanding the strength of the impression thus made upon the monster at the time, it gradually grew fainter now that the eastern lady was no longer before his view. He began to curse himself for his folly: he thought of the heavy bribe which had been promised him—of the danger which he incurred by remaining in the metropolis—and of the facilities which had been held out for his emigration to Australia or some other part of the world.

"And have I been fool enough," he said to himself, "to lose sight of all them there adwantages just because a petticoat of a rayther better shape than usual, was a flaunting afore my eyes. I tell you what, Barney," he continued, thus apostrophizing himself: "it's my opinion as how you're getting to be a cussed fool; and if so be I had my stout stick in my fist, I'd just lay it over your precious back."

Mr. Barnes walked on: the dusk was setting in—the lamps were lighted—there were two continuous lines of illumination stretching towards Oxford Street, far as the eye could reach. All of a sudden the Burker was accosted by some one who asked him the way to a particular street which he named. Barney could scarcely repress a visible start when the voice first sounded in his ear: for the individual who thus accosted him, was none other than old Jonathan Carnabie, the parish-clerk and sexton of Woodbridge.

"Well, yes—I do know the way," replied the Burker, rendering his voice as soft and oily as he possibly could: "but if so be you're a stranger in London, sir, I should advise you to take a cab——"

"The fact is, sir," interrupted Jonathan, "I am walking on principle. It is the first time I was ever in London; and I want to know something about it: therefore I like to find my way on foot—and if I lose it, I inquire it."

"Quite right, sir—quite right!" said the Burker. "But you ought to take care of yourself—I mean of your pockets, you know——"

"And so I do, sir," answered Jonathan Carnabie. "I've read in books and I've also been told that London abounds in queer characters: but I keep my money for the most part at my lodgings, and just come out with as much as I think I may require."

"Quite right, sir!" again said the Burker. "I happen to be going a part of your way——"

"In which case," said the old sexton, "I shall be happy to avail myself of your guidance. Excuse me, sir, but I saw at once that you were a respectable man—or else I should not have taken the liberty to address you."

"Quite right, sir," said the Burker, who now that he had got hold of a particular phrase, harped upon it; for he thought that it had helped to make this favourable impression.

They walked along together. Mr. Barnes was satisfied that his disguise was complete: and from the moment that Jonathan Carnabie had mentioned the money at his lodgings, the Burker experienced an irresistible inclination towards his wonted practices. He saw no reason why he should not fleece the sexton if possible; and moreover he experienced a sort of pride and an inward gloating satisfaction

at the thought of being thus able so effectually to deceive the old man in respect to who he really was.

"Have you been long in London, sir?" inquired the Burker, speaking slowly, and measuring his words as much as possible, for fear that he should let out any favourite expression of his own and which might raise Carnabie's suspicions.

"Only a matter of three or four days, sir," responded the sexton. "I presume you live in London, sir?"

"Yes," answered the Burker: "I'm a man of business——"

"Perhaps a lawyer, sir?" said the sexton inquiringly.

"Well, I do a little in the conveyancing line now and then," rejoined the Burker.

"And very profitable too, sir, no doubt?" said the sexton, who was pleased as well as proud of having fallen in with such good company.

"Quite right—quite right, sir!" said Mr. Barnes. "I do manage to get a good livin' by the transfer of property."

"I suppose you attend the Courts, sir—the Law Courts, I mean?" continued Jonathan.

"Not more than I can help," responded the Burker. "That's a atmosphere that don't agree with me."

"Too hot and close, sir?" suggested Mr. Carnabie, who was inclined to be chatty and to make himself agreeable.

"Well, it don't agree with me werry well," rejoined Mr. Barnes: "it always gives me a queer feelin'——But perhaps you'd like to take a drop of summut, sir?" he suddenly interrupted himself, just as he was on the very point of adding that the queer sensation he alluded to very much resembled a crick in the neck.

"I think I'd rather not take anything, sir, till I get to my lodgings," said Jonathan: "but if you would condescend to step in with me and drink a quiet glass of brandy-and-water, I shall feel very proud. My landlord is a superior sort of man——he is a schoolmaster and parish-clerk——Mr. Chubb by name. Perhaps you have heard of him, sir?"

"I've heerd speak of a man named Chubb, which is famous for making locks," answered the Burker; "and I can't abear——"

But here he checked himself again; and the truth was that old Jonathan Carnabie did not take particular notice of the Burker's bad grammar and peculiar phraseology, so pleased and flattered was he at having fallen in with a legal gentleman of such great respectability. And then too, it was the old sexton's first appearance in London: he had been accustomed to the country all his life—and he was inclined to view everything and everybody pertaining to the metropolis in a superior light. The Burker—more and more convinced that the mystery of his disguise was absolutely impenetrable, and resolved to amuse as well as benefit himself at Jonathan Carnabie's expense—began holding forth to him on the beauties and wonders of the metropolis, with the idea of rendering himself as agreeable as possible.

"This here is a werry fine road," said Mr. Barnes; "as straight as a harrow right up to Oxford Street till you come to the corner of the Tottenham Court Road and St. Giles's. You see this here gate on your right hand leading into the Park? Well, it's Tyburn."

"God bless me!" said old Jonathan. "Not where the people used to be hanged?"

"The werry identical same," responded Mr. Barnes. "There's many a fine feller has rode a horse there foaled by a acorn, and danced upon nothink amidst werry great applause. My grandfather——"

"Most likely saw many such sights?" said Mr. Carnabie inquiringly.

"Yes—he was rayther fond of 'em," rejoined the Burker, who had been upon the point of letting out that his respectable ancestor was one of the individuals who had given a terrible notoriety to the district of Tyburn. "Pray, sir, what's your idea of the punishment of death?"

"Why," answered Jonathan, who was imbued with all antiquated prejudices, "I think that when a man has done a great deal of wickedness, he ought to be put out of the world."

"Quite right, sir — quite right!" said the Burker emphatically. "I'd hang 'em all, the scoundrels! I suppose you have come up to London, sir, on a little business?"

"Yes," answered Jonathan; "and I've got all my expenses paid, as well as good lodgings found for me: so that I've got a little opportunity of enjoying myself in a quiet way."

"A country gentleman, I presume, sir?" said the Burker, with as much of an insinuating tone as he could possibly assume.

"Not exactly a gentleman," rejoined old Carnabie, who was a man of truth. "I hope you won't think the worse of me, sir, when I tell you that I'm a parish clerk?"

"Why, if there's a class of men that I cotton to more than all others," exclaimed the Burker as if in admiration, "it's the werry respectable one that you belongs to. I've always found 'em a set of intelligent say nothink-to-nobody set of chaps; and at this present speaking I've got three cousins and two uncles which is parish-clerks themselves. You should just see how fond the Archbishop of Westminster is of my cousin Tom!"

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mr. Carnabie: "I was not aware that there was an Archbishop of Westminster."

"To be sure!" ejaculated the Burker: "he lives just t'other side of the bridge—a beautiful palace, with the Noted Stout House on one side, and the famous sassage-shop on t'other. I'll see if I can't get my cousin Paul—Tom I mean—to introduce you to his lordship."

Mr. Carnabie was quite confounded at the idea of such an honour: and when he had somewhat recovered from its overpowering effects, he expressed his acknowledgments in suitable terms.

"Oh! I can introduce you to a many fine folks," continued the Burker. "There's the Chief Judge at the Old Bailey, and two or three of the magistrates, which knows me uncommon well. How long, sir, do you think of staying in London?"

"It all depends on circumstances," replied the sexton. "I am not entirely my own master. But excuse me, sir, for not being more confidential on the business that has brought me up to town: it's quite of a private nature——"

"Pray don't make any apology, sir," interrupted Barney. "You're quite right to keep

your own counsel. What did you say your name was, sir?"

"My name is Jonathan Carnabie, at your service, sir," responded the old sexton.

"And mine, sir, is Mr. John Smith," rejoined the Burker. "I don't happen to have a bit of paste-board about me at the moment: but I shall be werry happy to see you to dine with me to-morrow at my house, Number 347, Grosvenor Square. No ceremony, you know. Just a bit of fish, a plain jint, a tart, and summut of that sort —with maybe a bottle of wine or so."

Again was Mr. Carnabie confounded by the honours and favours thus showered upon him: and again were his acknowledgments duly expressed. He and his companion walked on together, until at length they reached the commencement of the street in which Mr. and Mrs. Chubb resided, and which the sexton now recognised as the locality to which he had sought to be directed.

"I tell you what," said the Burker, "let you and me be alone together over this glass of brandy-and-water that we're going to have at your place: cos why, don't you see, I don't know nothink of your landlord—and it won't do for a man like me to demean his-self to associate with everybody."

"But Mr. Chubb is a parish clerk!" exclaimed Jonathan; "and I thought you just now said——"

"All right, my good friend!" interrupted the Burker: "I don't fly from my word. Parish clerks is the best fellers in existence: but I happen to know summut of this man Chubb, now that I come into this street and recollect where he lives."

"Why, is he not a respectable person?" inquired Mr. Carnabie in astonishment. "Those who recommended me to his lodgings—or who indeed took them for me, I should rather say——"

"Well, well," said the Burker, "he's respectable enough as far as the world goes. But betwixt you and me and the post," added Mr. Barnes, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, "there isn't a burial that takes place in Chubb's churchyard that he don't make ten or twelve guineas more out of it than he had ought to do. You understand me—a nod is as good as a wink—and Chubb is hand and glove with the surgeons."

"God bless me!" ejaculated old Jonathan, stopping suddenly short: "do you mean to say that he is in league with the resurrectionists?"

"Nothink more nor less," answered the Burker. "But keep your own counsel. It isn't for me to make mischief: I only tell you this to show why I don't choose exactly to put my feet under the same mahogany with this feller Chubb."

Old Jonathan Carnabie gave a deep groan of horror: but the Burker hastened to speak a few reassuring words; and they continued their way to the front door of Mr. Chubb's residence.

CHAPTER CVIII.

CONTINUATION OF THE BURKER'S ADVENTURES.

THAT door was opened by the slipshod servant-girl who was maid-of-all-work in the establishment; and Jonathan Carnabie led the way to the little parlour which he occupied and which was the very same that Christian Ashton tenanted at the time he was private secretary to that illustrious potentate, the Grand Duke of Saxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Barney the Burker followed his new acquaintance into the parlour: the girl was ordered to bring up glasses and hot water: the brandy was produced; and after having imbibed the contents of the first tumbler, Jonathan Carnabie found his spirits expanding after the damp thrown upon them by the terrible aspersion flung against the character of his landlord Mr. Chubb.

"You're werry comfortable here—werry comfortable indeed," said the Burker, looking around him.

"Yes," answered Jonathan, "there is nothing to complain of in respect to the lodgings. I've got a nice little bed-room exactly overhead."

"And I hope you lock your door at night," said the Burker, in a low voice. "Not that I mean to say the people of the house would do anythink wrong: but London is a queer place, and thieves is like ghosteses — they insinivates theirselves here, there, and everywhere."

"Thank you for the hint," said old Jonathan, refilling his tumbler. "I myself have had a little bit of expereience in respect to the consummate villany of a London scoundrel. Did you ever hear of a man called Barney the Burker?"

"I can't say that I have," responded the individual himself, speaking in a slow and measured tone, as if he were racking his memory upon the point. "Who is he?"

"A murderer—and everything that is bad," replied Jonathan. "He came down into the country—I took him as an assistant—the ungrateful wretch was very near murdering me—but assistance came at the very nick of time—the villain fled precipitately, and plunged into the river. It was thought that he was drowned: but only a few days ago he turned up somewhere in London—— Surely you must have heard, Mr. Smith, of a house that was entered by the police, and where on digging up the cellar or some underground place, evidences were discovered of barbarous murders having been committed?"

"To be sure! Now you mention it," said the Burker, "I do know summut about it. It was in the papers—wasn't it?"

"Yes," replied Jonathan; "and heavy rewards were offered for the discovery of the wretches. I hope they will be found."

"I hope they will," added the Burker, as he coolly set about compounding his third tumbler of punch. "Well, all them things, Mr. Carnabie," he continued, "shows how careful you ought to be in locking your door of nights and stowing away your cash in a place of safety. I tell you what I do: I always have a matter of five or six hundred guineas in my house; and I poke it all up the chimley in my bed-room. That's betwixt you and me: but no one would think of looking up a chimley in search of money."

"I content myself," answered Jonathan, "with locking up the little I have got in my box. It isn't much—but still it's too much to lose."

"Quite right! quite right!" said the Burker: "never throw away a chance."

In this manner they continued to discourse for

some little while longer—until old Jonathan Carnabie began to feel the effects of the hot brandy-and-water which he was drinking. Then the Burker suggested something about the propriety of a little bit of supper—adding "that he was always accustomed to take a mouthful at nine o'clock in the evening, at his mansion, No. 347, Grosvenor Square, —where he should be happy to see his friend Mr. Carnabie to dinner at five o'clock on the morrow."

The old Sexton, in spite of the penuriousness of his habits, thought that he could not possibly do otherwise than give the best possible entertainment to so liberal, generous, and hospitable a friend; and as he himself had dined at two o'clock, he had no disinclination for a supper. He therefore suggested a rump-steak, and was preparing to ring the bell to order the same,—when the Burker caught him by the arm, saying, "Stop, my good friend! don't trust that dirty drab of a servant to go out and buy anythink for you. There's nothink like a lobster for supper; and it just happens that my own fishmonger lives close by. No offence—but I'll go myself and send in the finest he's got."

Jonathan vowed that he would pay for the lobster: but Mr. Barnes would not think of such a thing; and he issued forth accordingly. Proceeding to the nearest fishmonger's he purchased a very fine lobster, which he ordered to be sent to Mr. Chubb's; and on his way back, the Burker just dropped into a chemist's shop, where he procured a small phial of a certain liquid drug which he pretended to be under the necessity of taking. He then returned to Mr. Chubb's abode, and rejoined his friend Mr. Jonathan Carnabie.

The lobster was served up; and the old sexton relished it all the more that he had not been compelled to pay for it. Another jug of hot water was brought up: the tumblers were refilled; and the Burker seized the opportunity to pour a few drops from his phial into Jonathan Carnabie's glass. Five minutes afterwards the old sexton was lying back in his arm-chair in a state of complete stupefaction.

The Burker rose from his own seat—took a candle in his hand—and crept softly up the stairs to the bed-room overhead. To force open the box was the work of a few moments; and at the bottom of all the clothes the villain discovered about thirty sovereigns in a worsted stocking.

"Well, the game was worth playing for," he said to himself, as he secured the coins about his person: and then he cautiously crept down the stairs again.

At that very instant there was a loud double knock at the front door: the Burker, hastily puffing out the candle, deposited it in a corner; and the next instant he himself opened the door. A tall gentleman in a cloak was standing on the steps; and Barney at once recognised the person who had so suddenly interfered to prevent his murderous design on old Jonathan Carnabie at Woodbridge. But not for an instant did the Burker lose his presence of mind: he issued forth; and the next moment the servant-girl appeared to answer the inquiry of Mr. Redcliffe—for he, as the reader has doubtless understood, was the tall gentleman in the cloak. We must add that not for an instant had Mr. Redcliffe suspected that the individul who had just passed him was the miscreant Burker.

We must follow the footsteps of the last-mentioned person. On turning the nearest corner, he quickened his pace—he sped into Oxford Street—and entering a cab, ordered the driver to take him to Whitechapel Church. On arriving there the Burker dismissed the cab, walked along for a few minutes, and entering a public-house, sate down to reflect upon the course which he should now pursue. He somewhat repented the trick he had played old Jonathan Carnabie. Not that he regretted having obtained possession of the thirty sovereigns—very far from it: but he feared there would be a hue and cry—and whether or not it was suspected that it was veritably the Burker who had committed the robbery, an accurate description of his present personal appearance would be sure to obtain publicity. He must therefore change his disguise altogether; and it was on this subject he was now deliberating within himself.

It was a small public-house, in an obscure street leading out of Whitechapel, which Barney had thus entered. There was only one other person in the little parlour at the time; and this individual speedily rose and took his departure. A few minutes afterwards the door opened; and another person entered. He wore a low-crowned hat with very broad brims—beneath which appeared masses of red hair; and he had large whiskers, of a corresponding hue. He wore a pair of those green spectacles which have side-glasses, and are denominated shades. A loose brown paletot, or overcoat, was buttoned up to the throat, which was encircled by a thick shawl-neckerchief. The over-coat, as well as the grey pantaloons, were a little the worse for wear; and it was difficult at a first glance to judge what the social position or the avocation of the individual might be. The waiter followed him into the room with a glass of hot gin-and-water: the green-spectacled stranger threw down a sovereign and received the change. Before the waiter left the parlour, the Burker ordered his own glass to be refilled; and in the meanwhile, he was furtively surveying the individual who had just entered. The latter was doing precisely the same thing in respect to the Burker; and though the eyes of both were shaded by spectacles, yet each appeared to have the intuitive suspicion that he was the object of these stealthy regards on the part of the other.

The waiter brought in the fresh supply of spirits-and-water which the Burker had ordered; and when he had retired, the two occupants of the parlour surveyed each other again in the same stealthy manner as before. At length the Burker suddenly burst into a loud laugh; and dashing his hand upon the table, exclaimed, "By jingo, Jack, it's excellent! The only thing is, it's *too* good!"

Jack Smedley—for he was the disguised individual who had so recently entered—started up from his seat in direst alarm at that sudden guffaw on the Burker's part: but quickly recognizing his friend's voice, he was relieved of a world of terror.

"You don't mean to say this is *you*, Barney?" exclaimed Jack as they shook hands.

"Hush, you fool! No mentioning of names!" growled the Burker, savagely. "But I tell you that you've done the thing too strong: that red wig of your'n," he continued, in a low voice, "isn't nat'ral: them false whiskers is too bushy;

and then you've got the wery identical broad-brimmed tile you was always used to wear. What do you think of this for a masquerading costume?"—and the Burker glanced complacently over his own person.

"I never should have known you," answered Jack. "But I say, don't you think the people of the house will think it odd that two such queer-looking chaps—both with spectacles on—should meet in their parlour?"

"Where are you living, Jack?" inquired Barney, hastily.

"Pretty close by," was the response. "I've got a bit of a lodging, and three or four sorts of disguises——"

"The very ticket!" said the Burker. "Tell us where it is. Then you go off first—I'll foller in a few minutes—and we'll have a chat about our affairs."

This arrangement was carried into effect; and in something less than half-an-hour the Burker and Jack Smedley were seated together in a small poorly-furnished back room, belonging to a house in one of the obscure narrow streets leading out of the Commercial Road.

"And so you haven't heard anythink about Bab?" said the Burker, thus resuming the thread of a conversation which was temporarily interrupted by the process of mixing some spirits-and-water, the materials for which Jack Smedley had just placed upon the table.

"Nothing of her," answered the last-named individual. "I suppose you know how I gave the detectives the slip at the station the other day; and ever since I've been playing at hide-and-seek with them."

"You don't mean to say they're on your track?" demanded the Burker.

"I hope not," responded Jack Smedley, shuddering violently at the bare idea. "But what is it otherwise than playing at hide-and-seek when one is obliged to go about in all sorts of disguises? I'm sure I don't how it is to end: I'm uncommon tired of this kind of life: but I don't dare leave London—I think it's the safest place after all when one's in trouble."

"No doubt of it!" remarked the Burker. "But the people of this house?"

"Oh! they're all right enough—or at least I hope so," rejoined Jack Smedley. "I pass as Mr. Wilkins here; and they think I'm a begging-letter impostor or something of that sort. You may very well suppose that I have not taken the trouble to undeceive them."

"I should raythor think not," replied the Burker. "As for myself, I've just been doing a little bit of business which renders it necessary that I should turn myself inside out and put on a new disguise."

"Well," responded Jack Smedley, "there is choice enough here for you:" and opening a box he displayed several disguises of different kinds, and each being as unlike all the rest as possible. "But where have you been living in London?"

"I haven't been living nowhere," rejoined the Burker: "I only come up to town this morning—and I don't think my name has yet figured in the Fashionable Arrivals."

"And that disguise—that dye for your face——"

"Oh! it's too long to tell how I come by it," interrupted the Burker, "I've got some business in hand that will keep me in London for a day or two—perhaps more; and therefore I shall just take the liberty of borrowing one of these here disguises. What the deuce is this?—a Jews gaberdine and a great grey beard——"

"Yes—wig and all complete," exclaimed Jack Smedley. "It's the only dress I have not as yet worn. But hadn't you better stay and sleep here in my place to-night——"

"It won't do, Jack, for two such fellers as you and me to be too much together," interrupted the Burker. "I shall leave you presently: but we can make an appointment somewhere for to-morrow night—and in the meantime I'll just borrow this dress of your's."

Thus speaking, the Burker proceeded to examine the gaberdine, the wig, and the beard; and he thought to himself that it would be the very best disguise he could possibly assume.

"Where did you buy this!" he asked, thinking it prudent to ascertain something of that particular disguise'a antecedents if he could succeed in obtaining such information.

"I bought the whole kit which you've got in your hand, at a shop in Rosemary Lane," replied Jack Smedley.

The Burker proceeded to put off his own disguise, and he likewise washed the chemical dye from his hands and face. Then, by means of a thick fluid gum which Smedley furnished him, he fastened on the grey beard, which covered all the lower part of his face, and which with its associated moustache concealed the mal-formation of his lip. He put on the grey wig which formed part of the costume: he hesitated as to resuming the spectacles—but he at length decided on discarding them. The gaberdine was one of those long, black, loose, straight-cut upper garments worn by some of those old-fashioned Jews who sell pastiles, soap, or rhubarb in the streets; and when the Burker had put it on, Jack Smedley expressed his approval of the completeness of the disguise. A low hat, with very large brims, crowned the Burker's head; and as he gave one of his coarse laughs, he expressed a wish that he had a small wooden tray and a few pastiles, that he might play his new part to perfection.

"And now, Jack, I'm off," he added. "You've lent me a good disguise—and you've got some of my toggery in return. If it was a little colder, I shouldn't have given you up that handsome black coat of mine. But how about to-morrow night? Where shall we meet?"

After a few minutes' deliberation, a place was named; and the Burker sallied forth. Returning into Whitechapel, he pursued his way towards Aldgate,—in the vicinage of which he was acquainted with a public-house where he knew he could obtain a bed for the night without any questions being asked. But all of a sudden he stopped short; and a deep but terrible imprecation burst from his lips. He had left all his money behind him in the breast-pocket of the coat which he had taken off at Jack Smedley's lodging. Yes—all the money he had received from the Duke of Marchmont, and all of which he had so recently plundered Jonathan Carnabie, had been thus left behind! In his breeches-pocket he had but three or four shillings and a few halfpence.

"I don't think Jack would rob a pal," said the Burker to himself, as he began hastily to retrace his way towards the lodging-house: and yet the miscreant had terrible misgivings in his mind.

The long gaberdine getting about his legs, encumbered him in his walk, which now almost amounted to a run; and he kept on muttering imprecations against the Jewish costume in which he had disguised himself. He reached the lodging-house: he knocked at the door—the summons was attended to by an old woman, who was the mistress of the place; and she exclaimed angrily, "What do you mean by coming back again to disturb us between eleven and twelve at night?"

"No offence, my good woman," answered the Burker: "but I just want to say a word to my friend—what's his name again?—Oh! Mr. Vilkins!"

"Then it's no use your coming here," replied the woman: "for Wilkins has gone, bag and baggage."

"Gone?" vociferated the Burker. "It's a lie—and I will see him! So stand aside——"

"Who says it's a lie?" demanded an old man—the woman's husband—popping forth his head, which had a white cotton night-cap on, from a side-door in the passage. "You hadn't left the house a minute before Mr. Wilkins went and fetched a cab, and took himself off with his traps, paying us a week's rent instead of giving us a week's warning. Now you've got your answer; and so be off with you, or I'll call the police."

At that very instant the Burker beheld a constable appear within the rays of the lamp at the corner of the street; and with another lowly muttered but terrific imprecation, he hastened away. When beyond view of the policeman, the Burker paused to reflect upon the course which he should

now pursue. That Jack Smedley had really robbed him, was only too evident; and instead of being in possession of a considerable sum of money, Barney was almost penniless. He not merely longed to get back his gold, but likewise to wreak a terrific vengeance on Jack Smedley. Suddenly a thought struck him. He advanced to the nearest cab-stand—drew the waterman aside—and putting a shilling into his hand, asked him whether such-and-such a person (describing Smedley according to his disguise) had fetched a vehicle from the rank within the last half hour? The waterman replied in the affirmative; and he furthermore named the house to which the cab had gone to take up the individual's luggage. This was the house where Smedley had lodged; and therefore the waterman's tale was evidently correct. But the waterman was totally unable to afford a clue to the direction in which the cab had subsequently driven.

"But if so be you particularly want to know," added this functionary, "you've only to wait till the cabman comes back—and then you can learn all about it."

The Burker decided upon adopting the hint thus given; and he entered an adjacent public-house, where the waterman promised to rejoin him immediately upon the return of the particular cabman whose presence was now required. The Burker, in a mood of savage sullenness, meditated the most desperate vengeance if he should only succeed in tracking out his false friend. Thus nearly an hour passed: Barney was growing desperately impatient: but at length the waterman made his appearance, accompanied by the cabman, who had only just returned to his rank.

The Burker now ascertained that Jack Smedley had been driven in the cab to a street at the back of St. Luke's Hospital in the Old Street Road—that he had alighted there, and had taken his luggage into a house the inmates of which were in bed at the time of his arrival, but had got up in obedience to his summons, and had given him admission with much apparent willingness. The Burker was compelled to give the cabman a shilling for this information; and then with his remaining coin he retained the man's services to take him up as far as St. Luke's Hospital. The church in Old Street proclaimed the hour of one just as the Burker alighted from the cab. He now pursued his way on foot; and in a few minutes reached the house which the cabman had accurately described to him. The Burker was totally ignorant of who the occupants of the dwelling might be: but he felt tolerably well assured that they could not be what is termed respectable—or else under existing circumstances they would be no friends of Jack Smedley, supposing them to be acquainted with him: while on the other hand, if he were unknown to them, they would scarcely have admitted a stranger at such an hour. But that seeming willingness on their part, to which the cabman had alluded, to afford Smedley a lodging, warranted the conclusion that they at least knew something of him.

The Burker's mind was soon made up how to act. He rang at the bell—for knocker there was none; and in a few minutes he heard footsteps approaching along the passage inside. An elderly man—with a candle in his hand, and only half dressed—appeared at the door; and very much astonished did he look at the singular aspect of the Burker, with the beard and gaberdine.

"One word with you, my friend," said Barney in a low but peremptory tone: and he at once entered the passage.

"What does this mean?" demanded the man, affecting a look of indignation, though in reality he had a visible trouble depicted on his countenance.

A glance showed the Burker that the key was in the street-door: he at once locked it—and taking out the key, said to the man, "You don't know me—eh?"

"No," was the response, nervously and tremblingly given.

"Then I'm a detective—that's what I am. You needn't stare at me after that fashion: it's a dress I've wore to look out for a chap that's wanted—and I've found him at last. I don't mean *you*—so you needn't look so glum: though if you've any of your nonsense or cause any obstruction, as the saying is, I shall precious soon walk you off. I've got half-a-dozen of my people in the street."

At this moment a woman, about a year or two younger than the man—both of whom were elderly—emerged from an adjoining room, with terror depicted upon her countenance: for she had evidently overheard all that the Burker had just been saying.

"I hope there's nothing wrong, sir," she began, in a voice of whimpering entreaty. "Me and my husband keeps a respectable lodging-house—and though poor——"

"Well, I've no quarrel with you," interrupted the Burker: "but just show me the way to the room where you've lodged the person which arrived here just now in a cab."

The looks which the man and his wife exchanged, convinced the Burker that he was on the right track—that Smedley was there—and that they morever knew who he was.

"Come now, no nonsense!" he said: "but be quick—or it will be all the wuss for you, I can promise!"

"Up-stairs—the back attic," said the man: and he presented the candle to the Burker.

"Now, I'm going to manage this little business without no noise," remarked the villain; "and so if you both hold your tongues, you'll find it the best way to keep out of trouble."

"I'm sure we're very much obleeged to you, sir," said the woman: "and if so be you'll take a drop of something to drink——"

"Presently," interrupted the Burker. "There! go into your own room—keep quiet—and leave me to manage. Do you think he can hear what we are saying?"

"I'm sure he can't," responded the man,—"unless he's come half-way down stairs for the purpose—which isn't likely. He wouldn't think anything particular of the door bell ringing, because he knows what sort of a house it is."

The Burker now waved his hand for the elderly couple to retire into their room,—which they accordingly did,—both firmly convinced that their visitor was a detective in disguise. Barney, with the light in his hand, began ascending the stairs; and in a few moments he gained the top landing. Then, as he opened the door of the back attic,

Smedley started up in his bed from a sound sleep,—giving vent to an ejaculation of terror on recognising the disguised Burker.

"Hold your tongue, you scoundrel!" growled Barney, as he entered the room and closed the door. "You sneaking, white-livered rascal!" he continued, in a voice which though low, was full of a deep savage concentrated rage; "did you think as how you could play your cursed pranks upon me?"

Jack Smedley was as ghastly as a ghost; while, as he sate up in bed, his hair was literally standing on end and his whole frame was quivering. He endeavoured to speak—but could not: he was a prey to all the terrific and horrifying dread which the appearance of so desperate a man as the Burker was under such circumstances but too well calculated to inspire.

"Now mark me, Jack Smedley," resumed the terrible Barney: "if I don't find every coin of my money safe among your traps, I'll have your life though I swing for it to-morrow morning!"

"It is all there," gasped forth the miserable gold-beater, whose cowardice was only equalled by the wickedness of his disposition. "But pray don't hurt me—pray don't!"

"Hurt you?" echoed Barney: and he ground his teeth with ferocious rage. "I did swear to myself just now that I would have your life: but if so be I get back my blunt, I'll leave you for the hangman. There never was such a dirty, sneaking, paltry scoundrel as you are in this blessed world! Why, your wife Bab was always ashamed of you—always!—and I'm blowed if I think Jack Ketch himself would like to have to do with such a fellow!"

Smedley began to whimper and snivel; while the Burker, deliberately drawing forth his dreadful-looking clasp-knife, proceeded to cut the chords of the box which was in the attic. He opened it: he found all his money safe; and his eyes glistened with a savage joy as he resumed possession of his gold. He continued to ransack all the contents of the box: but he found therein nothing else worth taking.

"Where's your own money?" he demanded of Smedley. "Here, I suppose!" and he caught up the pantaloons which the gold-beater had been wearing, and which were lying over a chair.

There were six or seven sovereigns and a quantity of silver in the pocket: but Jack Smedley, now having the horrors of utter destitution before his eyes, began to moan so piteously that the Burker thought to himself, "He will do something desperate if I leave him penniless; and maybe he will blow the whole thing, turn round and peach, and make a general smash of it. I'll play the generous towards him."

The Burker placed upon the table the money which he had just taken from the pocket of the pantaloons,—saying at the same time, "Leave off that precious moaning and whining—can't you, you fool! Or do you want me to slit your windpipe for you? Now look here, Jack—you're a thundering rascal, and you know you are: it would serve you right to leave you without a scurrick, as you meant to leave me. But I'll just give you another chance: so I'll content myself with taking back my own. And now good-bye."

With these words, the Burker turned and quitted the attic,—while Jack Smedley felt so marvellously relieved by his disappearance, that the loss of the money he had meant to self-appropriate was now but a very secondary consideration. The Burker descended the stairs: the man and woman of the house issued forth from their room, wondering to hear only the footsteps of a single individual—for they had naturally expected that the supposed detective had come to take Jack Smedley into custody. The Burker did not however choose to volunteer any explanation: he ordered them both to go back into their own room and not bother him with their presence: and then opening the front door, he quitted the house.

CHAPTER CIX.

THE AYAH AND MR. REDCLIFFE.

It was in the afternoon of the day following that night's incidents which we have been relating; and Mr. Redcliffe proceeded to Queen Indora's villa. Having passed a couple of hours in her society, he took his leave: but as he was issuing from the front-door, Sagoonah, who opened it for him, suddenly laid her hand upon his arm, and said in a low deep voice, "It is absolutely necessary I should have a few minutes' conversation with you."

Redcliffe stopped short in astonishment. For an instant the eyes of the Hindoo woman had shed upon him their burning light in that same manner which on three or four previous occasions had struck him as being so peculiar: but now, the next instant, her looks became full of a soft and earnest entreaty.

"What mean you, Sagoonah?" he asked: "what can you have to say to me which may not be said in the presence of your mistress? Your request is so strange——"

"I beseech and implore that you will grant me a few minutes!" responded the ayah. "Oh! pray, pray do! Yonder—in the field at the extremity of the garden—I will be there in a few minutes! Oh, Mr. Redcliffe, refuse me not!"

She then hastily glided away; and Mr. Redcliffe, issuing from the villa, deliberated bewilderingly with himself as to the course which he ought to pursue. The haunting looks of Sagoonah appeared to corroborate the idea that she had really something of importance to say to him; and he could at least see no harm in hearing what this might be. He accordingly decided upon keeping the appointment which she had just given him: and on quitting the grounds attached to the villa, he repaired to the field which was completely concealed by a screen of trees from the windows of Queen Indora's habitation. In a few minutes he beheld the white dress of Sagoonah at a short distance: at first she approached rapidly; but when within a few yards of him, she relaxed her pace and seemed to be smitten with confusion and timidity.

"What have you to fear, Sagoonah?" asked Mr. Redcliffe: "why is your manner thus strange? Draw near, and tell me for what purpose you besought this interview, and what important communication you may have to make to me?"

"I know not, sir," responded Sagoonah, in a low soft tremulous voice, "whether to sink down at your feet and speak as a slave—or whether to look you in the face and with the dignity of a woman address you."

"These are strange words," said Mr. Redcliffe, gazing intently upon the ayah in the hope of fathoming her purpose by the expression of her countenance. "You speak of slavery: there is none in this country—at least not that species of slavery that you are thinking of. Even if there were, I should not claim such homage from you——"

"Ah! but, sir," interrupted Sagoonah, "if there be no slavery that is enacted or confirmed by law, there may nevertheless be a slavery in which the feelings or the passions enthrall the individual!"

"What mean you, Sagoonah?" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe, who now appeared to catch a slight scintillation of the real truth: but the next instant he repudiated the suspicion from his mind as something preposterous or impossible. "What mean you?" he repeated.

The ayah advanced a little nearer towards him: there was a moment's flashing of her brilliant burning eyes; and then the next instant they were curtained by her ebon lashes, and her looks were downcast. For a moment too it appeared as if she were really about to assert that womanly dignity of which she had spoken; but that as if she found it impossible to be maintained against the influence of other and softer feelings which were agitating within her.

"Mr. Redcliffe," she said, in a voice that was again tremulous, "I would fain consult you upon a point which closely and intimately concerns my happiness."

"But why not consult your kind-hearted mistress?" inquired Mr. Redcliffe. "She, Sagoonah, is the most fitting person to be made your confidante, and to proffer you such counsel as may be necessary under the circumstances."

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Sagoonah: "my mistress is the very last person whom I can consult!"

"And it is equally impossible that you can consult me," said Mr. Redcliffe coldly: for the varying confusion, hesitation, and embarrassment of the ayah—a moment's dignity being succeeded by minutes of tremulous bashfulness, and by a visible diffidence in coming to the point,—all these served to strengthen the suspicion which had previously entered the mind of Mr. Redcliffe.

"I am a stranger in a strange country," continued Sagoonah, now throwing a deep pathos into her tone; "and yet you refuse to become my counsellor—my adviser! Ah, sir! if this be the harbinger of that extreme cruelty which I am to experience at your hands when the revelation of my secret shall be fully made——"

"Listen to me, Sagoonah!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe: and though he now spoke peremptorily, yet it was likewise with a certain degree of kindness: for he felt that after all his suspicion might be wrong; and being utterly without vanity or self-conceit, he could scarcely fancy it was correct. "It is not seemly for us to continue in conversation here: both your character and mine would suffer if we were observed. I do not mean to address you in harsh terms: but you are now at once to understand from my lips that without farther hesitation on your part must you proceed to the communication you have to make to me—— Unless indeed, Sagoonah, you would rather that we should separate at once, and that we should both forget the occurrence of this private interview."

"Forget?" ejaculated Sagoonah, almost in accents of bitter scorn—not at Mr. Redcliffe himself, but at the idea as she had caught it up. "Forget? No—it is impossible! Never can I forget aught that is connected with you! And now you have my secret," she exclaimed, for a moment flinging her burning regards upon him: then, as the next instant they were again curtained by their dark fringes, she added in a low voice, "I love you!"

Mr. Redcliffe first felt inclined to give vent to expressions of anger and indignation; and this he would assuredly have done if dealing with an English woman who sought to set herself up as a rival to Queen Indora and tempt or beguile him away from that plight which he had made her and from that troth by which he now considered himself so solemnly bound. But a second thought made him reflect that it was a Hindoo woman who stood before him—one who belonged to a distant and different clime—whose thoughts and whose notions were as distinct as the habits and customs of that clime itself from those of Western Europe. Instead therefore of displaying anger or scorn, Mr. Redcliffe considered it alike more prudent and more generous to reason with Sagoonah.

"I will not pretend," he said, "to doubt the seriousness with which you have made that avowal, inasmuch as I cannot for a moment suppose that you would stoop to such miserable trifling. But it is impossible, Sagoonah, that you can entertain the slightest hope——"

"Hope, sir?" she murmured. "Love itself is hope! Of one thing I am certain:—you love not Queen Indora, although you have promised to espouse her! Then wherefore may I not hope that you will yet learn to love *me?*"

"If I were to tell you, Sagoonah," replied Mr, Redcliffe, with a deep mournfulness in his tone and a profound compassion in his looks, "that the power of love is dead within me, you perhaps would not understand my meaning. But let me address you on another subject. What is your age? You are in your twenty-sixth year—with all the vigour of youthfulness—still young——and I do not mean to compliment you when I say that you are beautiful. I am three or four years past forty: but through care and grief my appearance is that of a still older man. Whatsoever personal beauty I may have once possessed, is gone——"

"You forget, sir," interrupted Sagoonah gently, "that I have known you for many years——yes, from my very girlhood have I known you! Was I not from a child brought up in the palace of Inderabad?—and think you not, therefore, my memory retains your image as I first knew you?—so that even while I now look upon you, I fail to observe whatsoever ravages time or other circumstances may have wrought upon you. You were the first European whom I ever beheld; and therefore from my very girlhood was there all the interest of novelty in my mind; — and is it

surprising that such interest should have expanded and ripened into another feeling? Oh, sir!" continued Sagoonah enthusiastically, "my brain is stored with memories in respect to yourself!—memories which I have cherished and which I have fed upon as the most delicious of food! Ah, imagination transports me back to the spacious halls and marble courts of Inderabad. I see myself a girl of fifteen or sixteen, seated by the side of a fountain—and you approach—you speak kindly to me—you tell me of the far-off land from which you came—this land where I now find myself, and which at the time I so little dreamt I should ever visit! And I see you walking as it were in all the pride and glory of your own civilization, amidst the comparative barbarism of that native clime of mine! I hear those around me speaking of wise and liberal measures ordained by the King: I hear your name mentioned with admiration—for full well is it known that from the suggestions of your wisdom do those measures emanate! Oh, I am a young girl again—I am roving through the gardens and the marble courts of Inderabad: I already love you—my admiring looks follow you, though you perceive them not: I look up to you as a superior being that has come down amidst the immeasurable inferiority of that people to whom I belong!"

It was with a strange and wild exaltation that Sagoonah spoke—an exaltation fervid, glowing, and rapturous; and if Mr. Redcliffe had eyes and a heart to be smitten with the grand spectacle of that Hindoo woman's darkly splendid beauty, he could not have failed to be stricken *then!* The supernal lustre of her eyes shed a halo of animation upon her countenance: her supple, willowy form yielded in eloquent gestures and graceful attitudes to the varying tenour of her discourse: the quick heavings of her bosom gave visible undulations to the snow-white drapery which covered it: while her arms, bare to the shoulders—so admirably modelled though of dusky skin—played their part with a grace all natural and unstudied in those gesticulations which gave such force to her language, half pathetic, half passionate.

"Sagoonah," said Mr. Redcliffe, "I ought not to have tarried to listen to such discourse as this; and if you were an Englishwoman, our interview would have been cut short almost at the instant it commenced——or perhaps, I should rather say that it would not have been granted at all! But once more I conjure you to listen to me attentively. Either you mean that I am to prove faithless to the vow I have plighted to your mistress, and receive yourself as a wife?—or else you intend me to remain faithful to that plight in some sense, but to abandon myself to the temptation of an illicit love with you? In either case you are acting most improperly: you are outraging the loftiness of that very female dignity of which you ere now spoke: you are behaving ungratefully to the mistress who has ever been so kind and indulgent towards you. Do you not comprehend me, Sagoonah? Will you not promise that you will stifle this infatuation which you have been cherishing, and that never more henceforth will you address me in such terms? You see that I do not reproach you: I speak kindly to you——and surely, surely your better feelings must be touched—your good sense must make you aware of the truth of all I am telling you?"

"If you possess an enchanter's power," responded Sagoonah, "give me back my freedom of the heart—release me from the spells with which you have enthralled me—pluck out from my brain all the memories of the past—tear away from my soul that image which has become as it were interwoven with my own existence! If you can do all this, Mr. Redcliffe, *then* indeed may we separate at once, and I may faithfully promise never more to address you in the language which I have been holding! Oh, think not that I am unaware of the desperate—the well nigh hopeless condition in which I am placed with regard to you! But my feelings are stronger than myself; and I have no more power to crush this love of mine than you have to bid it be crushed. Is it not therefore vain to talk to me of duties and proprieties? is it not useless to remind me of the kind indulgence of a good mistress—aye, and all the more so," she added, in a voice which suddenly became low, and which had a deeper meaning in it than Mr. Redcliffe could fathom at the time,—"aye, and all the more so inasmuch as I feel that I have sinned against her too deeply to leave room for repentance!"

"But, Sagoonah," said Mr. Redcliffe, now adopting a sterner look and a more peremptory tone, "it is absolutely necessary that you should exercise a becoming control over your feelings. I do not love you—I cannot love you! Whatsoever influence you may hope, think, or seek to exercise over me, would only be a tyranny against which I should rebel; and I do not wish to speak too harshly—but still I must add that if it went too far I should punish it! Your good sense must tell you that were I to breathe in the ear of your mistress a single syllable of all that has now taken place, she would not retain you in her service. Be reasonable therefore——"

"Be reasonable?" echoed Sagoonah, her eyes flashing fire, and her entire form writhing as if with the sense of an insult. "Who are you that bid the flames which you have excited suddenly quench themselves? Can you command the volcano to cease its heavings and be still? How then think you that you can exercise such a power over the human heart? No, Clement Redcliffe! it is you who are most unreasonable. I am but a poor weak woman—you are a strong man; and it is *you* who are playing the tyrant towards *me!* You ere now asked me what my purpose was and what my hope is? Listen——No, do not interrupt me! I insist upon speaking in my turn—and it is my turn now! Since I left Inderabad, I have learned much of the world—I have looked upon it in a new light—I have studied it—I know it. Well aware am I of the immeasurable distance which exists between myself and you—of the great gulf which social distinctions have established between us. Think not, therefore, that I seek to become your wife! No—but I will become your slave; and to be your slave, is to be your mistress—the toy with whom you may play—the object that may gratify a passing phantasy. But you must renounce the vow which you have pledged to Indora——"

"Sagoonah!" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe angrily.

"Listen—listen!" cried the Hindoo woman vehemently: and she stamped her foot with excitement. "You shall hear me to the end! I

was saying, therefore, that you must renounce your vow to become the husband of Indora. A diadem awaits her:—surely, surely she can leave to her humble slave the happiness of the heart's love? And, Oh! think not, Mr. Redcliffe, that if you really loved Indora, I would insist upon such a sacrifice as this! No: I should have mercy upon you—because, alas! I know what it is to love. It is really no sacrifice that I am demanding on your part. You seek not for worldly honours nor earthly titles: you care not for that Sovereign dignity with which the sharer of Queen Indora's throne would become invested. Ah! you see that I comprehend your disposition well. Then, after all, what is it that I ask? That you will not marry where you do not love—but that you consent to receive a slave and a mistress where you are beloved!"

"And all this, Sagoonah, is an impossibility," said Mr. Redcliffe. "I have endeavoured to reason with you—and you will not be reasonable. You now compel me to speak out the full truth sternly—and you may think implacably. Nevertheless, it must be done. Return you to your mistress: for here our interview ends. I shall call at the villa to-morrow; and by your demeanour shall I be decided whether I retain the seal of silence on my lips—or whether I must perform a duty by explaining to Queen Indora everything that has taken place. Do not regard me as an enemy, Sagoonah: I would rather be your friend! I have made all possible allowances for you——"

"No, sir—you have *not!*" interrupted Sagoonah vehemently. "The poor Hindoo woman has her feelings as well as the haughtiest lady of your civilized British land. Mine are wounded. Think you that I have no virtue? think you that I value not my chastity and my honour? The former is immaculate—the latter untarnished. Yet do I offer to sacrifice my virtue for your sake. Judge thereby the strength of my love! And is such a love as this to be subdued by a cold mandate to be reasonable? is it something to be crushed like this?"—and setting her foot upon a wild flower, she trampled it down, half disdainfully, half vehemently.

"Sagoonah, I must leave you," said Mr. Redcliffe: and he was turning away.

"No—our interview ends not thus!" interrupted Sagoonah: and bounding forward, she caught him by the arm. "You know not what it is to trifle with the feelings of a woman—thus to scorn her love—to refuse the slightest sacrifice on your part! Such a love as mine is capable of turning into the deadliest hate. I need not remind you that I belong not to the same cold clime as you——"

"Sagoonah, all this is ridiculous!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe. "If you were an Englishwoman, I should conceive that your brain was turned by witnessing the outrageous details of some highly-wrought melo-drama—or that you had stocked your brain with phrases from some preposterous romance. I now insist that this may end; and remember that it is yourself who are the cause that I am speaking thus harshly!"

Sagoonah drew back; and for a few instants she contemplated Mr. Redcliffe in so singular a manner that he was utterly at a loss to fathom what was passing in her mind. It seemed as if the intense fervour of love were about to turn into hate—as if the fire which burnt in her eyes, expressed a passion of one kind that might in a moment flame up into another. But then, blended with all that, there was an expression of mingled compassion and anguish upon her countenance; and she looked, too, as if she still so far clung to hope that she would not yield to the desperation which might make her take some step impossible to be recalled. In a word, the ayah's countenance at that moment was a tablet of the wildest contradictions: the traces of her feelings were there—but they were hieroglyphics impossible to be deciphered.

"Mr. Redcliffe," said Sagoonah, all the fire of her eyes suddenly yielding to a deep and mournful pathos, "you will not doom me to utter misery! Oh, do not—do not! Is there naught that I can do for you? Set me the most impossible of tasks—and I will even achieve the impossible! Put my love to the test—you shall find that it will pass through the ordeal! Will you not have mercy upon me? Look upon me as a woman standing upon the brink of a precipice, and whom one touch of your hand may hurl over into the abyss, or bring back to a position of safety. Oh, my brain is turning! I feel as if I were going mad! Have mercy upon me!"

Sagoonah sank at Mr. Redcliffe's feet: she pressed her hands to her brow—she gave vent to convulsive sobs. She appeared as if distracted.

"I pity you, my poor Sagoonah," he said, bending down to raise her: "but beyond that feeling of compassion——"

"Oh! such a love as mine," interrupted the ayah, strongly emphasizing her words, "is not to be satisfied with mere compassion! Mr. Redcliffe, give me your love—or at least accept mine! But refuse me, and beware lest your scorn suddenly arms me with the venom of a serpent!"

"Sagoonah," answered Mr. Redcliffe, "I can now keep no terms with you: for I see that there is evil in your disposition. A woman who can speak as you have just spoken, must be prepared for any extreme, however desperate. It is my duty to report everything to your mistress——"

Again Sagoonah flung herself upon her knees, exclaiming, "No—no! spare me! be merciful unto me! I spoke at random! Oh! not for a moment—no, not for a moment would I dream of executing whatsoever menace in my despair was thrown out!"

"Well, then, I consent to pardon you," said Mr. Redcliffe. "Yes, I will pardon you. But it is only on this condition—that never henceforth, by word nor even by look——"

"I understand you, sir," interrupted Sagoonah: "and I thank you for this mercy which you are vouchsafing unto me:"—then as she slowly rose up from her suppliant posture, with an expression of countenance which was singularly calm and placid after all the excitement she had just displayed, she said, "Farewell, Mr. Redcliffe. Pray forget, as you have promised to forgive, whatsoever has now taken place."

"I will, Sagoonah—I will both forgive and forget," responded Mr. Redcliffe; "and let me sincerely hope that your reflections in your calmer moments will lead you henceforth to be completely reasonable."

"They will, sir—rest assured that they will," rejoined Sagoonah, with an air of the deepest

meekness: and then with the low obeisance of a slave, she turned away from the spot.

At first she proceeded slowly; and if Mr. Redcliffe could only have seen how ominous were the fires which flashed forth from her large dark eyes, his confidence in the assurances she had just given him would have been shaken, if not altogether dispelled. In a few moments she quickened her pace, and glided back into the grounds of the villa. Then Mr. Redcliffe, who had lingered on the spot to follow her with his regards, took his own departure.

CHAPTER CX.

THE BORROWED COSTUME.

THE dusk had now closed completely in; and Sagoonah, on regaining the villa, at once ascended to her own chamber. There she sate down to give way to her meditations.

"Did I not almost foresee it?" she thought within herself: "was I not incessantly haunted by the idea that he would scorn my love?—did I not continuously entertain the dread that it were impossible to thaw that frozen heart of his? It has been done—the attempt has been made—it has failed! It were madness to renew it! But now, what remains for me? A hopeless love—or a signal vengeance! Hopeless love? Ah, no! That were cherishing a serpent to gnaw continuously at my heart's core!—that were to surround this very heart of mine with red hot coals and fan them into an incessant blaze. I could not live thus! But vengeance? Ah! and it will not be vengeance on *one* only—but likewise on her to whom he has plighted his troth!"

Sagoonah arose from her seat and paced three or four times to and fro in her chamber. Her better feelings were maintaining a severe struggle against the agitation of the darkest passions of her soul: for she had truly and fondly loved Clement Redcliffe—and the blow which she meditated against him would, she thought, be crushing—overwhelming: it would be death—and yet not death to be inflicted by her own hand!

"Yes, I will do it!" she suddenly ejaculated within herself: "I will do it! I must have vengeance for this slighted love of mine——And besides, even apart from vengeance, I must do that which will effectually prevent him from ever becoming the husband of the Queen. Oh, to serve him as a slave—I who love him so madly!—to behold him in the arms of another—and that other whom I have so long hated as my rival!—No, no: I could not endure it! Oh, I will have vengeance—and my purpose shall be strong to wreak it! There shall now be no more feebleness with me. Did I not arm myself with the courage requisite to plant a dagger in the bosom of Indora? did I not even snatch forth the venomous reptile from its cage? did I not place it in her couch? And if circumstances were hostile to my aims—if those ventures of mine terminated in failure—was it through any lack of courage on my part? No, no! I was bold for all those terrific purposes of mischief;—and shall I prove myself weak now?"

Sagoonah stood in the middle of the chamber as she thus gave way to her sinister reflections; and when her mind was completely made up, she asked herself a final question. It was whether she did verily and truly possess the strength of mind that was requisite for the carrying out of her purpose;—and she answered herself in the affirmative.

"Now away to a magistrate," she said, "to give the information and strike the blow without farther delay! Ah, Christina Ashton, you little thought wherefore you found me so ready a pupil in studying under your tuition the accurate reading of the English language! You little suspected wherefore you discovered me bending with so much earnestness over that huge file of the English newspapers! And now I am about to turn my knowledge to an account—aye, and I know how to set about it! It is but to enter one of the public vehicles, and order the driver to take me to the dwelling of the nearest magistrate!"

Sagoonah was about to issue from the chamber, when she caught sight of herself in a mirror which she passed: and she stopped short.

"This dress," she said to herself, "betrays the poor Hindoo slave: and it may prevent me from obtaining admission to the presence of the magistrate. Ah! I have read how difficult of access are some of the high functionaries of this country—and how much depends upon the appearance and condition of those who seek an interview with them! Were it Queen Indora herself, with her rich apparel, every lace-bedizened lacquey would bow—every door would fly open—and amidst profoundest salutations would she be ushered into the presence of whomsoever amongst England's dignitaries she thus sought out. But I—the humble slave—Oh, it will be different with me! And then too, even if I succeeded in obtaining such an interview, my tale would not be believed: I should be treated with scorn and ridicule. What am I to do?"

And again the Hindoo woman sate down to deliberate within herself: but it was not for very long.

"If I do this," she went on reflecting, "dare I return to the villa? Will it not be known that from me the information was obtained. Besides, if I steal forth now, it will be two or three hours before I could return: my absence would be remarked—and when the blow should smite him almost at the very same time, Indora's suspicions would at once point to myself as the source whence it emanated. I must therefore bid an eternal farewell to this house and my mistress. Aye—and why not? Everything for vengeance! Nor need I go away empty-handed. And, Ah! I will apparel myself in a style that shall insure my admission into the presence of the magistrate whom I am about to seek."

Having thus settled all her proceedings in her mind, Sagoonah assumed a calm expression of countenance, and descended on some pretext to the drawing-room. She there found Queen Indora and Christina seated together, and engaged in conversation. Almost immediately afterwards Christian Ashton called at the villa, to pass an hour with his sister and the Queen; and Sagoonah felt satisfied that she had now ample leisure for the execution of her purpose.

Indora had worn during the earlier part of the day that same apparel—half-European in its

fashion, and half-Oriental in its style—which she had worn on the preceding day: but she had changed that dress for an evening costume, according to her wont, when she performed her toilet for dinner. This semi-English, semi-Eastern garb which she had put off, as we have just said, lay upon the couch in Indora's chamber. That chamber was now entered by Sagoonah, who lost no time in apparelling herself in the dress which she thus found upon the bed: and from the Queen's jewel-caskets she took many valuables, as well as a large sum in gold and bank notes which she found in a writing desk that happened to be unlocked. Concealing this wealth about her person, Sagoonah flung a thick and costly veil over her head. A few minutes afterwards she issued noiselessly forth from the front door of the villa. The evening had closed in: but it was a beautiful clear one—and all objects were plainly visible in the flood of argentine lustre which poured down from a cloudless sky.

We must for a brief space leave Sagoonah, just as she is beginning to glide through the garden attached to the villa; and we must return to an individual of whom indeed we have very recently spoken. This was Barney the Burker.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon of the day of which we are writing—and which was the one following his adventures with old Jonathan Carnabie and with Jack Smedley—the Burker bent his steps a second time towards Queen Indora's villa. He was habited in his Jewish garb which we have already described, and which was indeed a most effectual disguise against the peering vision of even the keenest sighted officer of justice. The dense foliage of evergreens, shrubs, and trees which embowered so large a portion of the grounds attached to the villa, afforded the Burker an easy opportunity of penetrating into the enclosure unperceived by any of the inmates of the dwelling. He concealed himself in the midst of that clump which was in the immediate vicinage of the fountain, and which had afforded him a hiding-place on the preceding day.

Presently he beheld Indora walking through the grounds, in company with a gentleman whom he instantaneously recognised. This was the one who had pursued him almost to his capture at Woodbridge, when he had saved himself by plunging into the river,—the same too whom he had seen on the preceding evening at Mr. Chubb's front door. But the Burker was ignorant that the gentleman bore the name of Clement Redcliffe. Queen Indora was then apparelled in the same costume in which the Burker had seen her on the preceding day: namely, the semi-English, semi-Eastern garb, of which we have been speaking. He was not long in perceiving that she gazed with tenderness on her companion: he saw that she loved him. At first the magnificent beauty of the Queen produced upon the Burker an almost overpowering influence, similar to that which he experienced on the previous day: but this gradually wore off, as in his ambush he reflected on the absolute necessity there was for him to accomplish the task assigned by the Duke of Marchmont, and reap those rewards which were to be the price of his iniquity. Besides, the Burker hated Mr. Redcliffe, against whom he entertained a bitter spite on account of the affair at Woodbridge; and he conceived that by fulfilling the Duke of Marchmont's mission in respect to Indora, he should be at the same time wreaking his vengeance on her companion. Thus was it that the miscreant was on the present occasion nerved with all his wonted satanic energies for a purpose of tremendous mischief.

But Mr. Barnes by no means intended to perpetrate the crime while Indora was walking with one who even if he did not prove a protector, might at least serve as a defender. He thought it very probable that Indora might presently remain alone in the garden; at all events he determined to wait. His hiding-place was deeply embowered in foliage: he was buried amidst laurels and bays; and when the dusk should be closing in, that ambush would be perfectly impenetrable.

There were a few moments, however, when the Burker experienced a mortal terror: for a stray dog, entering the grounds, began barking violently in the immediate vicinity of the spot where Barney was concealed. With what bitter imprecations did the miscreant curse the yelping cur! and with what infinite satisfaction would he have driven his long clasp knife into the brute's body! The animal stood upon the edge of the border in the midst of which the evergreens were planted,—barking with all its might: so that the circumstance speedily attracted the notice of Queen Indora and Mr. Redcliffe. They advanced close up to the spot: for a moment the Burker dreaded lest Mr. Redcliffe should make a minute inspection of the place: but immense was the miscreant's relief when that gentleman contented himself with merely driving the animal away.

Shortly afterwards Mr. Redcliffe took his leave of Queen Indora; and then followed the interview between himself and Sagoonah which has already been described. But in the meantime Barney the Burker continued in his ambush. He had often waited hours for an opportunity to accomplish some deed of evil; he was by no means likely to abandon his present enterprise, so long as there might by any probability be a chance of achieving it on this occasion. Besides, as well for him to remain an hour or two more in a place where his safety was comparatively secured, than to go wandering about the bye-streets of the metropolis, or sit down in some public-house, with the chance of being recognised and captured.

The time passed—the shades of evening fell: but as the stars came out and the weather was so mild and beautiful, the Burker thought to himself he would tarry yet a little longer in case Indora should by chance come forth to take another ramble. Presently his ear caught the rustling of a dress at no great distance: he listened with suspended breath: nearer it came — he heard the flowing skirt of the costume sweeping over the grass, and then brushing by some plant overhanging the border. The Burker peeped forth; and the next instant his hand clutched his clasp-knife —for he felt assured that it was Indora of whom he caught sight. Yes—the very same costume which he had seen her wear that day and on the preceding one!—and though the veil was now over her head, yet was it evident beyond all possibility of doubt that this was his intended victim!

All of a sudden there was a rush from amidst the trees: a faint shriek escaped the lips of the

LAURA.
C. WALL.

veiled one: but in the twinkling of an eye the weapon which the miscreant held was buried deep in the victim's bosom. Down she fell without another cry—with only a low brief moan; and at that very instant the Burker was alarmed by the sounds of footsteps approaching from behind the clump of evergreens that had formed his ambush. He darted away—plunged amongst the trees at the farther extremity of the garden—clambered the fence—and gained the adjoining fields.

After making a long circuit, the Burker re-entered London somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Edgeware Road. It was now ten o'clock; and as he passed along at a moderate pace, he said to himself, "At eleven punctiwal every night!—that was the agreement! I shall be in plenty of time; and if so be I wasn't, his Grace would not be pertikler to a minnit or two."

Mr. Barnes remembered that inasmuch as he was personating a Jew of venerable appearance, with a long black gabardine and a grey beard, he must not proceed too quickly, for fear lest the eye of some detective should settle its glance upon him.

"It's a burning shame," said the miscreant within himself, "that one can't walk through the streets of London without standing the chance of having the looks of impertinent curiosity riveted on one's self."

As he thus mused upon his wrongs, the Burker pursued his way; and on looking at the clock in a baker's shop, which was not as yet shut up, he found that he had a good half-hour's leisure before keeping the appointment on which he was bent. He therefore resolved to procure some refreshment: for many hours had elapsed since either food or drink had passed his lips. He entered a low public-house which he knew of old, but where he was tolerably certain he would not be recognised in the costume that he now wore. There were five or six villanous-looking ruffians drinking in the tap-room, which was clouded with tobacco smoke; and the Burker, shrinking with all a Jew's wonted timidity, into the obscurest corner, kept his countenance as much averted as possible, while he ate the bread and cheese and drank the beer which he had ordered. A rapid glance swept over the company, had made him aware that two or three of the men were personally known to him: but it by no means suited his intentions to reveal himself or claim their acquaintance. The company, on their part, were not particularly surprised with the presence of one whom they took to be a Jew: for at the public-house of which we are speaking there was at times a congregation of a variety of characters. Nevertheless the conversation was temporarily suspended when the Burker entered and glided into the corner: but it was speedily renewed again.

"Well, what about that there business, then, Toby?" inquired one of the men thus addressing a companion.

"Why, you see, Tummas," was the response, "he made the old feller as drunk as a fiddler, and no doubt hocussed his grog."

"Yes—you told us that just now," interrupted the individual who had previously spoken. "But did they know as how it was the Burker?—My eyes! what a gulp of heavy wet that old Jew has just took!" he added, in a lowered voice.

"How did they know it was the Burker?" proceeded Toby. "Why, because when the old feller came to his-self this morning, he recalled to mind everything wot had took place; and then he recollected the partickler way in which his friend of the previous night had spoke and wot a rum sort of lingo he had. He even wondered it hadn't struck him at the time: but having no suspicion, and thinking as how it was all right and that he had got into unkimmon good and respectable company, it wasn't much to be wondered at if the old feller was thrown completely off his guard."

"And how did you hear all this, Toby?" inquired one of the company: "how did you get hold of it, old chap? Tell us."

"Cos why I know's summut of Chubb's servant-gal—and she told me all about it. There is a genelman which goes to see the old man—Carnabie, that's his name again; and this genelman, it seems, called at the house last night just at the very moment Barney the Burker was leaving it."

"Well, and I 'spose the traps have had the office tipped 'em, eh?"

"Ah! you may be pretty sure of that," responded Toby: "but it was all done in a very snug and quiet way, so that the business might not get into the papers: for this Carnabie is a parish-clerk somewhere down in the country—and of course it wouldn't be respectable for such an old file to be knowed to get hisself so stupid drunk and make such a fool of hisself."

"Ah! the Burker's a clever cove," said another of the company. "What a hand he must be at a disguise! Blow me, what a hand!"

"I should have knowed him," exclaimed the man who answered to the name of Toby. "There's never a disguise that he could have put on so good as to prevent me from twigging on him."

Here the Burker, having finished his refreshments, thought he had heard enough: but he had very little fear indeed of being recognised by Toby, notwithstanding all the fellow's boasting. Indeed, exhilarated by the malt liquor he had imbibed, the miscreant chuckled inwardly at the opportunity of thus putting the boaster to the test; and rising from his seat, he walked more slowly through the room than when he had entered it. Toby stared at him, but only with a passing curiosity—and not with the faintest suspicion: so that the Burker issued from the public-house chuckling more blithely than before.

He now continued his way towards Pimlico; and he entered a narrow and somewhat obscure street, just as a neighbouring church clock was striking eleven. One side of the street was formed by a wall belonging to the grounds of some mansion: and trees overhung the iron railing which fenced the top of this wall. In the shade of these trees the Burker beheld a gentleman lounging along, and smoking a cigar as if with the ease of a rakish listlessness. This personage was the Duke of Marchmont; and the Burker, accosting him, said, "Good evening, my lord."

"Who are you?" demanded the Duke with haughty curtness: but when the Burker burst out into a coarse though half-subdued chuckle, the nobleman exclaimed, "What! is it possible?—*you* in this disguise?"

"Yes, my lord: it's my own werry identical self," responded the Burker. "There's been a

little shifting of toggery as your Grace perceives——"

"But the business—the mission I entrusted to you?" interrupted the Duke, anxiously and nervously.

"It's done, my lord," was the response chucklingly given.

"Done! Is it possible?" and there was a mingled exultation and terror in the Duke's tone.

"If it wasn't done, my lord," said the Burker, "what the deuce should I be here for? Didn't your Grace tell me to meet you somewhere about this spot at eleven o'clock on any night that I might have summut good to communicate?"

"Yes, yes—true!" ejaculated the Duke, who experienced a bewildering sensation—half in joy at being rid of a dangerous foe (as he thought)—and half in terror lest this new crime should engender new sources of apprehension.

"And now, your Grace, for the reward," said the Burker. "Short reckonings makes long friends."

"We cannot possibly converse here," interrupted the Duke. "Follow me!—but follow me at a distance!"

With these words Marchmont turned abruptly round, and bent his steps towards Belgrave Square,—an occasional glance thrown over his shoulder, showing him that the disguised Burker was following upon his track.

CHAPTER CXI.

THE LIBRARY.

THERE was a grand entertainment at the Duke of Marchmont's house in Belgrave Square on the evening of which we are writing. The reader is aware that the Duchess of Marchmont was an amiable and beautiful lady, but who unfortunately had experienced little happiness in her alliance with the Duke. She had forgiven him for that fearful conspiracy which he had concocted against her some time back at Oaklands: but though she had forgiven, she could not forget. Yet, with the natural generosity of her soul—with the self-sacrificing magnanimity of her disposition—she had studied to resume her wonted demeanour of affectionate regard towards her husband, and likewise to play the part which her high station assigned her in a manner that should prevent the world from suspecting her domestic infelicity. Thus was it that she from time to time gave those entertainments which a lady in her sphere was expected to give: while, on the other hand, the Duke, who to a certain extent studied outward appearances, intimated his pleasure that such receptions should take place at Marchmont House.

Especially, too, at the present time was his Grace anxious to court society, and to seem to have his leisure occupied by dinner-parties and other fashionable pursuits. When a man is either meditating or darkly conniving at a crime, he takes all possible precautions to avert suspicion, and to afford proof that his thoughts and aims were flowing at the time in altogether a different channel. Thus, at this period when he was in reality devoured with anxiety and suspense as to the result of the terrible task he had assigned to the Burker, he appeared to be pursuing a round of pleasure, and was giving splendid entertainments at his mansion in Belgrave Square.

On the evening of which we are speaking, there had been a dinner-party at Marchmont House; and the saloons were afterwards thrown open for the reception of a fashionable assemblage. Dancing commenced in one room: the card-tables were speedily occupied in another. The Duchess of Marchmont assumed a gay and cheerful aspect, though her heart was inwardly a prey to the never-ceasing sense of neglect and ill-treatment—yes, even hatred, which she had experienced on the part of her husband. The Duke likewise dissembled the real state of his own feelings—but for a far different motive: and when he passed through his sumptuously furnished and brilliantly lighted rooms—as if with the zeal of a host who is careful to see that his guests are surrounded by all possible hospitalities—frequent was the whispered remark to the effect "that his Grace had not for a long time seemed so cheerful nor performed his part so affably as on the present occasion."

A little before eleven o'clock the Duke of Marchmont had slipped away from the midst of the gay throng; and throwing on an overcoat, had issued forth by the back part of the premises to proceed to the place of appointment which he had arranged with the Burker. They met, as we have already described; and we left them bending their steps towards Belgrave Square,—the Duke leading the way—his assassin accomplice following at a little distance.

The Duke stopped at a door in a wall which bounded the back part of the spacious stabling establishment attached to Marchmont House; and opening that door by means of a key which he had with him, he waited till the Burker came up. He then conducted the villain through all that department of the premises, and led him unseen by any of the domestics into the library. Wax candles were burning there: for it was usual to light up any part of the spacious establishment which his Grace might think fit to visit. There was a screen at the lower extremity, which partially concealed one of the windows, whence a draught had lately been observed to emanate;—and at the instant that the door opened to admit the Duke and the Burker, a female figure glided behind that screen. The dress, as well as the window-draperies, rustled for a moment: but neither the nobleman nor the assassin heard the sounds, which were indeed slight and transient. The Duke locked the door; and throwing himself upon a seat, said in an anxious voice, "Now tell me all that has occurred."

"It's short and sweet, my lord," replied the Burker; "and I've no doubt will give your Grace the utmost satisfaction. Yesterday I kept watch in the garden of the lady's villa: but I had no opportunity of striking the blow. On t'other hand I had plenty of time to admire her beauty; and I don't mind telling your lordship that it well nigh unsettled me altogether. Well, my lord, circumstances last night made me change my disguise: and now I'll just ask your Grace's candid opinion which suits me best and which I look most genteelest in?"

"A truce to this nonsense!" interrupted the Duke impatiently. "Proceed. I am in a hurry."

"All right, my lord," resumed the Burker. "This arternoon I returned to the willa; and I soon saw her ladyship walking in her garden. She had company with her; and so I was again compelled to wait. But arter a while she came out to walk alone; and then I drove my good clasp-knife so deep into her buzzim that she dropped down with scarce a groan."

"This is true?—you are not deceiving me?" said the Duke, quivering with anxious suspense. "How am I to know that you have done this?"

"Send and inquire if you like, my lord," answered the Burker with brutal flippancy. "Or I'll be bound to say you'll read all about it in tomorrow morning's paper."

"And you are certain that the blow was surely dealt?" demanded the Duke.

"Look you, my lord," responded the Burker, drawing out his clasp-knife. "This blade is a long one: it went right down to the handle: here's the marks of blood upon it; and here's my ankercher, which I wiped it on as I rushed away from the spot."

"Enough!" ejaculated the Duke, averting his eyes from the sickening evidences of the crime which had been committed at his instigation.

"I hadn't failed to observe that the Lady Indoors—or whatever her name was," continued the assassin, "walked about with the whole contents of a jeweller's shop crowded on her person and dress; and I *did* mean to help myself to a few of them trifles. But just arter the blow was struck, I heerd footsteps coming from the direction of the willa; and as the lady had given a sort of skreek when I fust busted out upon her, I in course thought it had been heerd indoors and the servants was a-coming to see what it all meant. So I'd only just time to draw out my clasp-knife from the wound—which was a precious deep one, I know!—and then I seud away as fast as my legs could carry me. Now your Grace knows everythink; and you may give me my reward."

The Duke was in the act of drawing forth his purse—which was crammed with gold and bank-notes—when a strange rustling noise, apparently coming from behind the screen or the closed draperies of one of the windows, fell upon the ears of both himself and the Burker. They started up with dismay in their looks: but this feeling was expressed with a far more ghastly and horror-stricken aspect on the part of the nobleman than on that of the assassin. For a few instants the Duke stood irresolute — a prey to the most agonizing torture: then rushing towards the screen, dashed it aside—seized upon the window draperies and tore them asunder. A faint shriek rang forth; and he beheld a lady who was a total stranger to him. An ejaculation of ferocious rage dropped from the lips of the Burker; and his hand was already clutching his clasp-knife,—when the lady fell upon her knees, murmuring, "For heaven's sake spare me! spare me—I beseech you! Your secret is safe!"

Horror at all that she had heard, and wild terror at the menacing aspect of the Burker, were blended in her looks. The Duke of Marchmont was well nigh distracted: all the most frightful perils appeared to be environing him: his brain grew dizzy—his sight became dim—he reeled back a few paces, as if intoxicated with wine.

"Dismiss this dreadful man!—for heaven's sake send him away!" said the lady, accosting the Duke with looks that in terror appealed to him, while with horror they shrank from the ferocious gaze of the Burker. "I have heard nothing—— I mean," she continued confusedly, and in a dreadfully excited manner, "I will keep silent—I will not betray anything—no, not for the world!"

Encouraged by this assurance, and aroused to sudden energy by the desperation of the horrible circumstances in which he found himself placed, the Duke of Marchmont quickly drew forth his purse and a key; and he said to the Burker, "Here—depart! There is more than the reward I promised! Let yourself out by the way that we came! For heaven's sake lose not an instant! Away with you!—get out of London—leave England at once—immediately."

These injunctions were issued in a low, hoarse, but hurried whisper; and hastening to unlock the door of the library, the Duke pushed the Burker thence. The miscreant—judging by the weight and the feel of the purse that one end was heavy with gold and the other crammed with bank-notes—had no reason to tarry any longer; and he succeeded in effecting his exit from the premises without being observed by any of the dependants.

The Duke of Marchmont was left alone with this lady who was unknown to him. He locked the door again: and accosting her with a countenance that was ghastly pale, and in a voice that was now hollow with deeply concentrated emotions in which horror was predominant, he said, "Who are you? and how came you here?"

The lady—who was evidently much relieved by the disappearance of the Burker, and who was naturally of a courageous disposition—had by this time fully recovered her own presence of mind; and she said, "My lord, you have nothing to fear. I know everything; I overheard everything: but let us at once understand each other:"—and then bending her superb dark eyes significantly upon the Duke's countenance, she added, "Your Grace can recompense me for keeping your secret."

"Yes, yes!" he eagerly exclaimed: "anything—everything!—there is nothing you can ask which I will not grant!"

"Good, my lord," she observed: "I knew that we should understand each other. And now unlock that door: for one of your domestics knows that I am here—and he may happen to enter—or rather seek to enter—when it would appear strange to find that the door was secured."

The lady sate herself calmly down: the Duke hastened to unlock the door; and then returning towards her, he also took a seat, anxiously awaiting whatsoever explanation she might have to give. Though still tortured with agonizing feelings, he nevertheless had now leisure to contemplate her more attentively than he had hitherto done. She was apparently about thirty years af age—of tall stature, and splendidly formed. Her countenance was handsome; her hair dark—her eyes, of corresponding hue, large and lustrous. Sensuousness and decision were depicted in the expression of her features, and in the boldness—indeed we might say the hardihood of the looks which she bent upon the Duke. She was beautifully apparelled in ball-costume; and therefore was evidently one of the

guests who had been invited to the entertainment —or had at least found her way thither.

"My explanations will not be very long, my lord," she began; "and I repeat my assurance that your Grace has nothing to apprehend. Indeed, that we may all the better understand each other, I will be very candid with you. My life has not always proved the most virtuous that can be conceived. I was once the mistress of an officer in the Guards—subsequently of a rich old Baronet, who very recently died at his country-seat near Ramsgate. I am married: my husband is old enough to be my father—almost my grandfather; and we are poor."

"You are poor?" ejaculated the Duke, clutching eagerly at the avowal. "I will make you rich! I will make you rich! But proceed."

"Certain schemes in which I was embarked," continued the lady, "and which I had hoped would all turn out to my advantage, failed most signally. I came to London to stay with some friends: your Grace knows them—I allude to Sir James and Lady Walmer. I formed their acquaintance at Brighton; and they know nothing of the worst part of my antecedents. They received an invitation from the Duchess to her Grace's ball this evening; and they brought me with them. We arrived late, having been engaged to dine elsewhere. We entered her Grace's saloons just as your lordship was retiring. In your lordship's absence, Captain Walmer, the Baronet's son, offered to introduce to me a partner for a dance. To whom should he thus present me, but that very officer of the Guards whose mistress I was a few years back!"

"Who is he?" inquired the Duke quickly.

"Colonel Tressilian," responded the lady.

"And you yourself, madam—your name? you have not yet mentioned it."

"Mrs. Oxenden," she rejoined. "On being thus presented to Colonel Tressilian I lost not my presence of mind; for I relied upon his honour not to expose me. He bowed as if to a stranger; and I thought that I was safe. He offered me his arm: but instead of leading me to join the dance, he conducted me into an adjoining room, where we found ourselves alone. Then he threw off the mask of a temporary dissimulation, and addressed me with a stern hauteur. It appears that he is acquainted with Sir Edgar Beverley, who has married my sister. Sir Edgar is in London with his bride; and accidentally meeting Colonel Tressilian yesterday, he communicated enough to damage me irreparably in the Colonel's estimation. Therefore Tressilian insisted that I should at once leave the Duchess of Marchmont's ball-room—or else he should deem it his duty to expose my character to her Grace. It was ungenerous, considering the terms on which I had formerly lived with Tressilian: but he was inexorable. I besought him to spare me in respect to the Walmers': but with them also is he intimate—and all that I could obtain from him was a promise of forbearance and silence if in the course of to-morrow I quitted their abode. I withdrew from the ball-room; and a domestic conducted me hither,—where it was my intention to wait until the Walmers' carriage should be announced. To the domestic I pleaded indisposition—but desired that my friends might not be disturbed or annoyed by the intelligence in the midst of their own recreations. Your Grace's domestic has gone to fetch the Walmers' carriage, which was originally ordered to return at two in the morning: and it was the entrance of that footman which I apprehended when I requested your Grace just now to unlock the door."

"And your husband, Mrs. Oxenden?" said the Duke of Marchmont: "where is he?"

"At Brighton," responded the lady; "and I care not if I never see him again. I have explained to you the circumstances which brought me to this library. I had not been here many moments, when the door opened, and I heard a voice say, 'Come in! quick, quick!'—I had been pacing to and fro in an agitated manner: and on hearing persons enter, I was fearful of being questioned relative to the cause of my being here. At that moment I was close to the screen, and stepped behind it—thence gliding behind the window-draperies. I wonder that your Grace heard not the rustling of either the curtains or my dress ——But enough! You now understand how it is that I am here."

"And what can I do for you?" asked the Duke. "Money in abundance—riches—gold—gifts——"

"Patience, my lord, for a few minutes!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden: "for I have yet some explanation to give. When I married a man old enough to be my father, it was because I really wished to lead a respectable life—but more for the sake of my young sister than my own. Now, as I have already informed your Grace, certain projects on which I was recently bent, have utterly failed; and my sister is alienated from me. I will not return to my drivelling dotard of a husband: I care not for the farce of leading what is called a respectable life for the future. On quitting Ramsgate, my mind was speedily made up. Availing myself of a long-standing invitation on the part of the Walmers', I came to their house in London. My object in plunging amongst the pleasures of the metropolis shall be frankly confessed. Indeed, my lord," added Mrs. Oxenden, significantly, "there is no need for the existence of *any* secrets between your Grace and me."

"No, no—certainly not!" said the Duke, inwardly recoiling from the intimacy which had suddenly arisen upon the basis of a hideous crime becoming revealed to the ears of this woman who was so ready to take advantage of her knowledge thereof, and who could speak with such a mingling of bold hardihood and cold worldly-minded calculation.

"Well then, my lord," continued Mrs. Oxenden, "I am tired of playing the part of a virtuous and respectable wife, doomed to poverty; and I seek to become the mistress of some great and powerful personage who can give me riches. For this object I came to London: for this object I resolved to plunge into fashionable society. Accident has favoured my purpose more readily than I had dared anticipate, even with the consciousness of a beauty which is not inconsiderable."

"Mrs. Oxenden," replied Marchmont, "it shall be as you desire. To-morrow you will leave the Walmers'. Let it be in the middle of the day. Before noon you shall receive a note from me, intimating where a suitable house is taken for your reception. But remember!—the veil of inviolable secresy——"

"Shall remain thrown over all that reached my ears this night," replied Mrs. Oxenden, "so long as your Grace performs a generous part towards me."

At this moment the door of the library was thrown open, and a footman exclaimed, "Sir James Walmer's carriage is waiting for Mrs. Oxenden!"

The Duke of Marchmont handed the lady forth with every appearance of a respectful courtesy: they exchanged rapid but significant glances—and the equipage drove away.

The Duke returned for a few minutes to the library, to tranquillize the feelings which were still agitating within him notwithstanding that serene affability of manner which he assumed while escorting the splendid but infamous Mrs. Oxenden forth to the carriage: but it was no easy task for the iniquitous nobleman to quench the flames of the hell that was raging with volcanic power in his breast. It appeared to him as if by means of a crime he had only escaped from the power of one woman to fall into that of another; and he had already seen enough of Mrs. Oxenden to be aware that she would be imperious and exacting—that it was with no lenient hand she would sway the sceptre of despotism over him—but that she would prove his mistress in more senses than one. Vainly did the Duke endeavour to shut out from himself the realities of his position. He could not possibly blind his eyes to the conviction that every attempt which he made to disentangle himself from the web which his crimes had woven, only tightened and drew it the more enmeshingly around him. He shuddered and he trembled as he thought of all these things; and Oh! what would he have given to recall the past, when, as Lord Clandon, he had merely to contend against pecuniary difficulties, but had not as yet steeped his hands in crime!

Exerting himself to the utmost to regain his self-possession, and to banish all these horrible, torturing, harrowing apprehensions which were crowding in upon him, the Duke issued from the library and ascended once more to the ball-room. There he endeavoured to mingle with an appearance of gaiety amidst the throng that was really gay: but pleasure sickened him, like dainties in the presence of one whose appetite is sated and palled. The very lustre of the rooms seemed to make his brain reel: he talked at random—he laughed without reason. His veins felt as if they were running with molten lead: he was glowing with a feverish excitement—intense, agonizing. Thus a hectic colour sate like patches of vivid paint upon the ghastliness of his countenance: but the guests were far, very far from suspecting how racked, tortured, and harrowed was the mind of their host. They merely looked at each other and smiled,—thinking that his Grace had, during his absence of an hour or so, dropped in at some still more convivial party where his libations had exceeded the bounds of prudence.

It was half-an-hour past midnight, when the Duke of Marchmont was crossing the landing to pass from the ball-room to the card-room, that a note was presented to him on a silver salver by one of his footmen. He at once perceived that the address was written in a beautiful female hand, but which nevertheless appeared to have been somewhat tremulous, as if with excitement.

"From whom does it come?" asked the Duke, who, with a timidity ever attendant upon a guilty conscience, sought to glean beforehand some assurance that it was not the harbinger of a fresh calamity.

"I do not know, my lord," was the footman's response. "It was brought by a middle-aged man, dressed in plain clothes—but having the appearance of an upper domestic—such as a steward or butler. He only desired that the note should be given to your Grace; and he immediately departed."

The mystery attending the delivery of the billet—or at least a mystery as it appeared to the Duke's guilty mind—filled him with a cold terror; and proceeding to a room previously unoccupied, he opened the letter. The first glance at its signature seemed to sear his very eye-balls: a cry escaped his lips: he reeled, and would have fallen but that he staggered against a chair. Then he sate down; and Oh! how ghastly was his countenance now!—how that cold mortal dread had chased away fever's hectic spots from his cheeks!—and how fearfully did he groan in anguish! He passed his hand across his haggard eyes: he read the contents of the billet. It fell from his grasp; and he sank back in the chair—not in a swoon—but with a sense of appalling consternation.

And all this while the dancing was going on in the gilded saloons; and numerous lacqueys were arranging a sumptuous repast in the banqueting-room. Every window of the palatial mansion was glowing with light; and the roseate floods of luxury were streaming forth through the crimson draperies and the open portals into the Square. And belated passers-by or houseless wanderers stopped to gaze up at that lordly dwelling—each saying within himself, "Oh, how I wish I was the Duke of Marchmont!"

But if it had been given to any one of these to penetrate with a glance through those walls—to plunge a look into one particular room of that mansion, and to behold the rich and titled owner thereof lying back in his seat overwhelmed with the consternation of horror,—or if it had been possible for some spirit-voice to breathe the astounding truth in the ears of those loiterers and gazers,—the self-murmured words would have been, "Thank God! I am *not* the Duke of Marchmont!"

CHAPTER CXII.

THE WOUNDED AYAH.

We return to Indora's villa. When Sagoonah went forth disguised in the apparel of her mistress, the Queen was seated with Christian and Christina in one of the exquisitely furnished rooms on the ground-floor. The evening was sultry; and on a remark to that effect being made by Indora, Christian rose to open one of the casements. At that very instant a half-stifled scream coming from the garden, reached his ears, as well as those of the Queen and his sister; and the two latter started up from their seats.

Christian sprang forth upon the lawn on which the casement opened, and down to which the win-

dow reached,—Indora and Christina closely following him. It was a beautiful starlit evening; and as Christian sped in the direction of the spot whence the cry had seemed to come, he beheld a human form lying upon the gravel walk near the fountain. Ineffable was his amazement on recognising a costume which he had seen Indora wear; and ejaculations of bewildered astonishment burst from the lips of her Majesty and Christina themselves as they the next moment arrived upon the spot. Christian drew aside the veil from the prostrate figure; and the countenance of Sagoonah was revealed!

To raise her up was the work of a moment; and now the appearance of oozing blood drew forth fresh cries of horror and alarm from the lips of those present. The faithful steward Mark and the other domestics of the Queen's household were quickly on the spot. Mark was at once despatched for a surgeon; and Sagoonah was borne into the house. She was insensible: but life was not extinct. There was a deep wound in the region of the right bosom; and the blood was gushing out copiously. She was conveyed to a bed-chamber; and the garments were quickly stripped off by the female domestics,—Indora and Christina being likewise present: but Christian for delicacy's sake had forborne to follow into that chamber until Sagoonah was placed in the couch. The surgeon arrived, and then Christian entered with him.

The wound inflicted upon the ayah was deep and serious: but it was not mortal. The medical man could not however, at this early stage of his ministrations, hold out the positive certainty that she would recover. Everything in the meantime was done that his skill suggested; and then he had leisure to inquire how the murderous attempt had been made. But on this point no one seemed able to give him any satisfactory answer: yet it appeared only too probable that the assassin-blow was intended for the Queen herself, inasmuch as the hapless Sagoonah had been disguised in her raiment.

But here was fresh food for speculation and conjecture; and something had been discovered which was not mentioned to the surgeon,—inasmuch as it pleased Indora to issue a request to Christian and Christina, and a command to her domestics, that silence on that head should be observed: for if Sagoonah should recover, she might be enabled to give some satisfactory explanation—whereas if on the other hand she should perish, the Queen with her wonted generosity was anxious to spare her from the stigma which exposure would affix upon her name. The incident to which we allude was the fact that a quantity of gold and a number of Indora's most valuable jewels were found upon Sagoonah's person, concealed beneath the garments in which she had disguised herself.

The surgeon took his departure, to prepare some medicines which were to be administered to the wounded woman; but he promised to return in the course of an hour or two. Now the Queen, Christian, and Christina,—the first sense of excited horror being over,—had leisure to discourse on the terrible incident that had occurred.

"It was your own life, dear lady," said Christina, taking the Queen's hand and pressing it to her lips, "which was aimed at! Providence has shielded you—though it is fearful to contemplate that a blow has nevertheless been dealt at another. Oh, what a horrible mystery!"

"I am utterly at a loss to conceive what could have been Sagoonah's object," said the Queen, "in apparelling herself in my costume and taking some of my richest gems with her. Could the wretched young woman have meditated robbery and flight?"

"It appears impossible," observed Christian, "to put any other construction upon the circumstances, however much we may be disposed to suspend an opinion in the absence of a positive knowledge or of more criminatory evidence——"

"I have always thought," said Christina, "that Sagoonah was a strange creature——"

"But I always deemed her faithful and most devotedly attached to me!" said the Queen. "I would have staked my existence on Sagoonah's fidelity: I should have deemed her utterly incapable of a dishonest action!"

"It is strange—most strange!" said Christina in a musing tone: and her looks indicated that something peculiar was passing in her mind.

"What is in your thoughts, my dear girl?" asked the Queen earnestly.

Christina conceived that it would be improper to conceal any longer those nocturnal proceedings of Sagoonah which some weeks back had come to her knowledge, and relative to which she had chidden and remonstrated with her. She accordingly explained how she had one night detected Sagoonah poring over a huge file of the *Times*, in contravention of the Queen's injunction; and how on another night she had followed Sagoonah into the chamber where her Majesty was sleeping. Indora listened with mingled alarm and astonishment; and then she became profoundly pensive for several minutes. In reply to questions which her Majesty presently put, Christina detailed the explanations which Sagoonah had given on the two occasions respectively.

"In reference to reading the *Times*," said our young heroine, "Sagoonah pleaded a desire to prosecute her English studies;—and I believed her. In respect to her visit to your ladyship's chamber, she advanced a tissue of superstitious beliefs, the grossness of which I endeavoured to point out. She declared her love for you, and spoke of the dread which she had lest evil spirits should do your ladyship a mischief. Considering that her offences arose from ignorance and not from absolute wilfulness, and that she could not possibly entertain any sinister design, I promised to keep silent upon the subject. Perhaps, dear lady, I should have told you——"

"No, Christina," observed the Queen: "you were generous and kind-hearted—and it is impossible to blame you! There is some dark mystery attached to the proceedings of Sagoonah: but it would be wrong to judge her hastily in a hostile sense. Sometimes the good intentions of individuals wear at the first glance a suspicious aspect, especially when they are executed in secresy and when it is sought to shroud them in obscurity."

But having thus spoken, Queen Indora again relapsed into a profound pensiveness; and silence prevailed for many minutes in the apartment.

"Do you not remember, lady," asked Christina, at length breaking this silence in a gentle voice,

"that Mr. Redcliffe sent you a warning note, of which you spoke to me——"

"Yes, yes, my dear friend!" ejaculated Indora: "I have been thinking of it!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Christian, springing up from his seat; "and this reminds me of a duty as yet unfulfilled. In the bewilderment occasioned by this horrible occurrence, I had forgotten that we should give an immediate intimation to the police——"

"It is already done, Christian," interrupted Queen Indora. "Did you not hear me speaking to the surgeon on the subject, and intimating my desire that no greater publicity should be given to the occurrence than is absolutely necessary?"

"But the officers of justice will come," exclaimed Christian. "Would it not be well for me to go and fetch Mr. Redcliffe, that he may advise us also?"

At this moment there was a knock at the front door; and Mark entered to say that an inspector of police, with a constable, requested an interview with her ladyship. The Queen ordered them to be admitted;—and we may here remind the reader that the real rank of Indora was generally unknown, and that she passed as an Indian lady of great wealth. But the twins, as well as the faithful Mark himself, knew that she was a Queen—although, at her own request, they continued to address her by much more humble titles.

The inspector and the constable entered the apartment in which Indora was seated with our hero and heroine; and the superior officer said, "We have heard from Mr. Clarkson"—thus alluding to the surgeon—"that an attempt at assassination has been made in your ladyship's grounds but that there are reasons why the affair should obtain as little publicity as possible. Nevertheless, my lady, it is our duty to investigate the matter; for which object we require whatever information you may have to give."

The Queen recited the simple facts of how her ayah had been discovered in the garden in a state of insensibility, and with a deep wound between the bosom and the shoulder. Christian added that after the removal of the wounded woman into the house, he had searched carefully about the spot, but had failed to discover the weapon with which the blow was dealt. The officers went forth to examine the place for themselves,—Christian accompanying them, and Mark attending with a bright lamp—which was however scarcely necessary, for the moon was pouring its full tide of effulgence upon the scene. The officers discerned the traces of large coarse shoes upon the border and on the grass; and they were enabled to establish the fact that the intending assassin must have concealed himself in the midst of the clump of evergreens. They traced his footsteps to the palings which he had leapt on quitting the grounds: they followed them through the fields, until they ceased in the neighbourhood of a road leading out into the country. Then the officers returned to the villa.

"I presume," said the inspector to Queen Indora, "that your ladyship has no idea whether any one could have conceived a revengeful feeling towards your Hindoo servant or yourself——"

"Rest assured," interrupted the Queen, "that if I could point out the assassin, justice should not be cheated of its due! But candidly speaking, there are circumstances within my knowledge which may possibly unravel themselves, and lead to a development of this mystery. Understand me well! Though these circumstances to which I allude, are known to me, yet they do not point out who the assassin himself may be. More I cannot say,—unless it be to add that the greater the publicity given to this occurrence, the less will be the chance of those circumstances developing themselves from mysterious obscurity into an intelligible light."

"If the woman should die, my lady," said the inspector,—"or if accident should enable us to arrest any one on suspicion of having perpetrated this deed,—it will be necessary for your ladyship to reveal at a Coroner's Inquest, in case of the death—or before a magistrate, in case of the arrest of a suspected person—all those circumstances, to which your ladyship has just alluded."

"Living in this country under the protection of its laws," responded Indora, "I shall assuredly conform to them."

"At the same time," continued the inspector, "after all your ladyship has said, we will keep the whole matter as quiet as possible: because, so far from doing anything to defeat justice, we, as its functionaries, are bound to succour and advance its proceedings. Does your ladyship——"

"It were well if you questioned me no farther," interrupted the Queen. "I have told you as much as under circumstances I can possibly impart."

"Yet there is the fact," said the inspector, "that your servant was clad in apparel belonging to your ladyship:"—for Mr. Clarkson had told the police-authorities this much, though the affair of the ayah's self-appropriation of the gold and jewels remained unknown alike to surgeon and constables.

"Most solemnly do I assure you," said the Queen, "that I am utterly at a loss to comprehend my ayah's motive in thus apparelling herself in my clothes. But whatever it were—whether a mere freak, or whether for some less venial purpose—she has been sufficiently punished."

"And your ladyship does not mean to charge her with anything?" asked the officer.

"Charge her?" ejaculated Indora, almost indignantly: "no! certainly not!"

"Her ladyship would rather that this interview should end," whispered Christian hastily to the inspector; and at the same time he slipped a couple of sovereigns into the officer's hand.

"Very good, sir—very good!" observed the inspector, pocketing the amount. "We would not for the world give her ladyship any unnecessary trouble or annoyance—not for the world, sir! We shall let the matter rest until we receive any fresh instructions from her ladyship."

The inspector and the constable then took their departure; and the moment they were gone, the Queen said to Christian, "Now, my young friend, you shall proceed to Mr. Redcliffe, and tell him what has occurred. The carriage will be ready for you in a few minutes."

Our hero accordingly set off. It was now past ten o'clock at night; and he found Mr. Redcliffe at the lodgings in Mortimer Street. That gentleman was horrified at the intelligence conveyed to him; and he lost not a moment in accompanying

Christian in the carriage to the villa. During the drive thither, Mr. Redcliffe learnt from our hero's lips everything that had taken place; and he was particular in eliciting from Christian all that had been said by the police-officers or in their presence. He then fell into a profound reverie; and the silence was not broken until the villa was reached.

In the meanwhile the surgeon had returned. Sagoonah was unconscious of all that was passing around her: but still there was no immediate fear for her life. Christina, overcome and exhausted by the excitement of feeling which she had sustained, had sought her couch at the earnest entreaty of the Queen: while Indora herself had been sitting by the bed-side of Sagoonah, who knew not that the mistress whom she had intended to wrong so deeply by wreaking her vengeance upon Clement Redcliffe, was thus kindly ministering to her there.

Mr. Redcliffe and Queen Indora consulted together alone for a considerable time. It was impossible for them to doubt as to the source whence a horrible vindictiveness had emanated: antecedent circumstances only too plainly showed that the Duke of Marchmont must be the instigator of the assassin-deed. But then, who was the assassin—or rather, we should say, the intending murderer? From all that Mr. Redcliffe had previously communicated to the Queen, she had felt convinced that it was *not* Mr. Wilson Stanhope; and hence had she so emphatically expressed to the police-officers her incompetency to point to any particular individual. Mr. Redcliffe now shared her Majesty's opinion that the perpetrator of the deed was not Stanhope: for he had heard and seen enough in the conservatory of Oaklands to be enabled to judge—aided by the teachings of his experience in the mysteries of the human heart—that Stanhope, though unprincipled and profligate,

was not the man to go to such a tremendous extreme. It was therefore evident that the Duke of Marchmont had found some other instrument to execute—or attempt the execution of his foul purpose against Queen Indora's life: but still there were circumstances which prevented Mr. Redcliffe from denouncing the Duke before all the world; and the same considerations had led Indora to abstain from mentioning his Grace's name to the police-constables.

"Indora," said Mr. Redcliffe, taking her hand and pressing it with a grateful warmth, "this frightful danger did you draw down upon your own head by your magnanimous intervention in those affairs wherein I am deeply interested! But Providence has willed that you should escape the peril—and the blow has smitten another. I need scarcely remind you that the moment has not yet come when we can deal openly with him whose name it sickens and appals me to mention: but yet something must be done to paralyse him—to smite his soul with a new terror—and thus prevent him from daring to think of the renewal of his assassin purpose."

"Yes, my dear Clement," responded the Queen, "the tangled skein must go on gradually unraveling itself—gradually but surely, as for some time past it has been doing. And then——"

"But in the meantime, I repeat," interrupted Redcliffe, "something must be done. Ah! first of all, for a moment, let us talk of Sagoonah. You have just told me of her singular behaviour, as explained to you by Miss Ashton—how she pondered over the newspaper files by night—and how she sought your own chamber. These things are suspicious enough: but methinks that to a certain extent I have the power of reading them. Were it not for the dreadful circumstances of this evening, I should have abstained from revealing to you something that occurred—and it is this."

Mr. Redcliffe then proceeded to explain all that took place between himself and Sagoonah—how she had declared her love—and how for a moment she had menaced him. He stated likewise that he had on previous occasions been struck by the peculiar flashings of her eyes—and how those looks had ever haunted him, as if fraught with a sinister and unknown terror, and as if being ominous of evil. Indora listened with profoundest astonishment—an astonishment so great that it for a while absorbed all other feelings: but she was too noble-hearted and of too lofty a disposition to experience the anger of mere jealousy, or any vexation arising from a presumptuous rivalry on the part of her ayah.

"And now what think you?" she inquired: "what do you deduce from all that you have been telling me?"

"That Sagoonah has fathomed my secret," responded Mr. Redcliffe; "and that she pored over the files of the *Times* in order to obtain a complete insight into the past. That woman was resolved to hold me in her power. I understand her disposition well. If she could not have my love, she would give me her hatred: if she could not bend me to her purpose, she would wreak upon me her vengeance."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Queen, with anguish depicted upon her countenance: "and it was all my fault, dear Clement, that the wretched Sagoonah has been enabled to penetrate the mysteries which surrounded you—those mysteries which I had so fondly hoped were unveiled only to myself! It was through me—alas! through me that those newspapers were thus thrown in her way. Oh! I have been indiscreet: but I could not possibly foresee——"

"Blame not yourself, Indora—blame not yourself," said Mr. Redcliffe, again pressing the Queen's hand fervently. "All that you did was for the very best of purposes; and it would seem as if Providence were upon our side: for rest assured that Sagoonah was bent upon some design of mischief against myself, or it may be against you, at the moment when the assassin's dagger struck her down. It is only too evident that she was quitting your service for ever. She had laden herself with your gold and your jewels that she might have wealth in her possession: she had dressed herself in your apparel, either that she might throw off the character together with the garb of a menial—or else that she might personate you in some manner that should bring dishonour upon your name. Yes—these are the only alternatives which the circumstances present to our view: and the wretched woman has received a signal chastisement on the very threshold of her iniquitous purpose."

"Oh, that she could have been so wicked!" exclaimed the Queen; "and that I should have placed such confidence in her! I loved Sagoonah—yes, I loved her: or else never, never should I have unbosomed my secrets unto her!"

"She is now stretched upon a couch," observed Mr. Redcliffe solemnly, "from which she may perhaps never rise again: or on the other hand, if she should recover, it will only be after a long and lingering illness;—and thus for the present she is robbed of her sting in respect to both you and me. More than once have I seen that Providence is really working in my behalf; and if Sagoonah should die, it will be by heaven's dispensation which chooses to remove a reptile from our path: whereas if she should recover, it is to be hoped that during the interval that she must remain powerless for renewed mischief, the tangled skein will have completely unravelled itself, and I shall have no longer any reason to dread her knowledge of my secret. But now, my dear Indora, let us speak in respect to yourself:—for measures must be taken to ensure your safety."

"Let nothing be done, Clement," responded the Queen, "which may in any sense militate against your own interests or tend to compromise yourself. You know—you know," she added, with a look of ineffable tenderness—but one that was full of a soft pure delicacy of holiest and chastest love as well as of the heart's illimitable devotion,—"you know that I would cheerfully lay down my life for your sake!"

"I know it, Indora—I know it," answered Mr. Redcliffe, profoundly touched by this fresh proof of the Queen's attachment. "But think not for an instant I am so selfish as to suffer your safety to be any further compromised on my account. No, no—it must not be! Something shall be done—and that quickly too. Ah, a thought strikes me! Take writing materials, Indora—sit down and pen a few lines to my dictation."

Her Majesty at once complied with Mr. Redcliffe's desire; and as she sate at the table in the

drawing-room where this discourse took place,—Mr. Redcliffe slowly pacing to and fro, and with various feelings successively depicting themselves upon his countenance, dictated the following lines:—

"The assassin-blow which was intended for myself has smitten another. You will start at these words: horror will seize upon you: your wretched conscience will tell you that heaven itself is shielding *me* and warring against *you*. And you will feel, too, how useless it is for you to contemplate fresh iniquities in the hope of protecting yourself from the consequences of past ones. The web which you yourself have woven, is closing in around you. I do not bid such an one as you to confess everything and thereby make as much atonement as you can for the past: because I know that you will cling with a frenzied and desperate tenacity until the very last to that position which you hold. But I warn you, my lord, against a renewed attempt at a crime for which I am prepared. At the very first indication of such a proceeding on your part, will I remorselessly reveal whatsoever I know; and the hand which grasped that portentous dagger within the walls of Oaklands on an occasion to which I need not more particularly refer,—that same hand, I repeat, shall pen a narrative of all which concerns yourself, and to the Queen of England shall this narrative be sent. Tremble therefore at the precipice on whose verge you stand; and remember that if you again dare me to precipitate you into the abyss, nothing shall deter me from thus hastening a consummation which the progress of circumstances will otherwise sooner or later work out.

"INDORA."

The hand of the Queen trembled as it guided the pen which traced these lines; and as we have already said, varied were the feelings which successively found expression on the features of Mr. Redcliffe. It was in a low deep solemn tone that he dictated the note; and twice or thrice he pressed his hand as if in anguish to his brow. It was evident that a train of horrible memories—a troop of portentious antecedents, were conjured up by the words of that letter to the mental vision alike of Clement Redcliffe and of Queen Indora. The billet was finished: it was directed and sealed; and the Queen said, "Are you determined, Clement, to despatch this missive?"

"Yes, Indora—I am resolved," was the answer: "it is absolutely necessary. We will send it by the faithful Mark; and he shall be instructed to deliver it in Belgrave Square this very night,—without saying from whom it comes, and without tarrying for any reply."

This was accordingly done; and soon afterwards Mr. Redcliffe took his departure with Christian Ashton.

CHAPTER CXIII.

A WOMAN'S LOVE.

THE reader has seen the effect which Indora's letter produced upon the wretched Marchmont. If the writing of it had conjured up troops of hideous memories to sweep through the brains of the Queen and of Mr. Redcliffe, the reading of the document had assuredly done no less in reference to the Duke. For nearly half-an-hour did he remain like one stupefied with horror and appalled with dismay, in the apartment to which he had retired: it appeared to him as if he were in the midst of a frightful waking dream. Suddenly he started up from his chair, and dashed his hand with frantic violence against his forehead, as if he sought to beat in his own skull, or crush his own tortured, harrowed brain. Oh, the misery, the anguish, the crucifixion of feeling which this wretched man endured at that moment! Take all the horrors which have characterized the most frightful scenes ever enacted on the theatre of the world—the horrors of condemned cells, death-beds, or battle-fields—sum them all up—aggregate, compound them—extract their most refined essence—and it were nothing, nothing in comparison with the hideous tortures experienced by the Duke of Marchmont *now*. Oh! the deadly strife at Arbela, at Pharsalia, at Waterloo, or at Inkerman,—even these were as nothing in comparison with the stupendous concurrence of horrors which now found a focus in the soul of the Duke of Marchmont!

But he must endeavour to reflect upon his position: he must deliberate with himself. Reflection and deliberation!—were these possible with one in his agonized state of mind? We have said that he started up from his seat: he struck his hand with violence against his brow. He paced to and fro: he felt that he was staggering and reeling like a drunken man: he sank down into his seat again, groaning heavily—and, Oh! how mournfully, how lugubriously, how despairingly! His eye fell upon the note, which had dropped from his hand and lay upon the carpet. He snatched it up, and read it again. Yes—it was all as his horrified memory retained its contents. Again starting up from his seat, he applied the note to a wax-taper; and when the flame seized it, he threw it into the grate. It then for a moment appeared as if he breathed more freely; and he said to himself, "Let me think on all these things."

In order to concentrate his ideas, he rested his elbows upon a table; and covering his countenance with his hands, pressed the fingers upon his eyelids to keep them closed—so that by shutting out external objects, he might be the better able to turn all his attention inwards. He felt that he was in the position of a general besieged in a town towards which the enemy were gradually advancing: the trenches were being pushed nearer and nearer—mines were being formed—batteries were being raised—and he could not anticipate when the final attack should be made. Nor could he altogether understand with what weapons the enemy were fighting; and therefore he was at a loss to devise the means for strengthening his own position. The longer he reflected, the more bewildering grew his reflections: the longer he deliberated, the more perplexing became his deliberation.

"Indora knows much—and if not everything, at least *too much!*" he thought within himself. "But if so, why does she linger and tarry ere striking the final blow? Or is it that she only suspects, and is now engaged in accumulating proofs? Who is she? and what are my affairs to her? Can it be possible that *he* really lives? Yes, yes! Fool that I am to endeavour to blind myself to the tremendous truth! Have I not seen him? But does he know Indora? is there aught in con-

nexion between them? Ah! if so, he may be found at her house—he may visit her: she may be his wife—or his paramour? Who knows? What if I were to strike a tremendous blow and hand him over to the grasp of justice? No, no: caution must be used! That blow might rebound upon myself. And who is it that has been stricken by the bravo's dagger instead of Indora? How could the mistake have occurred? Oh, all this is dreadfully bewildering! My soul is on fire—my heart burns: it is not blood which flows in my veins—it is molten lead. My very brain is seething in boiling oil. The pangs of hell are upon me now! Oh, my God! there *must* be a hell hereafter; for there is even one in this life!"

And the wretched Duke of Marchmont, removing his hands from his countenance, and opening his eyes, glanced around him with ghastly shuddering looks of horror, as if he dreaded to behold Satan himself standing near, clothed in all the infernal majesty of those terrors which belong to his awful sovereignty.

"And then this woman too!" ejaculated the Duke, thus suddenly and abruptly resuming his silent reflections: "this woman who has discovered my secret!"—and he alluded to Mrs. Oxenden: "can I succeed in bribing her to silence? Yes, yes, this at least is practicable! But, Oh! what perils environ me! A spark may cause the explosion of a mine beneath my feet: a breath may destroy me! That villain!"—now alluding to the Burker: "if by accident he should be captured, he might tell everything. And if proof were demanded, how could I now indignantly repel the charge of such a miscreant, when he would demand that Mrs. Oxenden should be found and brought forward to corroborate his statement?"

At this instant the door of the room opened, and the Duchess of Marchmont made her appearance. The beautiful and amiable Lavinia came alone: she entered timidly and hesitatingly, with anxiety depicted upon her countenance; and she stopped short on perceiving how ghastly and how haggard were the looks of her husband, notwithstanding the sudden attempt which he made to assume an air of mental composure.

"My dear Hugh!" she said, again advancing towards him, "I fear that something dreadful has occurred to distress you?"

"Something dreadful?" he ejaculated, half fiercely, half affrightedly: "what mean you?"

"Oh! do not be angry with me, my dear husband," said the Duchess laying her fair white hand upon his arm, and looking up entreatingly into his countenance. "Believe me, I am not indifferent to your welfare——"

"Oh, indifferent indeed!" cried the Duke, affecting to laugh scornfully. "Perhaps you have come to tell me that you have forgiven me for my past conduct—as you have already told me on more than one occasion: and you think that I shall go down upon my knees to thank you?"

"No, my lord," replied the Duchess, the tears gushing from her eyes: "I neither think nor expect anything of the kind. I seek no self-humiliation on your part. But I cannot forget that I am your wife: I cannot forget that the vows which I took at the altar, pledge me to certain duties which must be fulfilled——"

"Enough of this maudlin nonsense, madam!" interrupted the Duke. "I understand you full well. In thus speaking of your own duties, you insidiously and cunningly seek to remind me of mine."

"No—you wrong me again! you wrong me, my dear Hugh!" said the amiable Duchess, the tears flowing faster from her eyes. "Will you put me to the test? Will you tell me wherefore you are afflicted?—and you will see how profoundly I can sympathize with you. Oh, for one kind word from your lips!"

"And why do you think that I *am* afflicted?" demanded the Duke quickly. "In short, what do you mean?"

"There is something in your manner—and—pardon me if I add that there is something also in your looks which prove but too unmistakably that you are afflicted. Oh! I declare solemnly, Hugh," continued the Duchess, "that your interests are dear to me—very dear to me!—and I have seen this evening how you have laughed with a hollow laugh—how you have spoken incoherently: and then too——but pardon me for what I am going to say——I happened to overhear one of the domestics say to another that you had received a letter a mere glance at which had seemed to strike as if with a sense of some misfortune."

"Ah! you overheard *that?*" ejaculated the Duke, who could scarcely prevent himself from stamping his foot and crying out with rage. "Then you watch me—and you listen to conversations——"

"Oh! I entreat your forbearance, my lord," said the Duchess imploringly: "not for worlds would I give you offence! I have often and often seen that a singular and painful expression has flitted over your countenance: and I have been afraid——yes, I have been afraid," continued Lavinia meekly, "that it was on account of myself. But to-night your looks and manner have been so peculiar——and then too, the circumstance of that letter——in a word, my dear Hugh, I was resolved to take a bold step and speak to you in a way which I have not before ventured upon. Will you forgive me? will you attribute my proceeding to its true motive? And listen to me, dear Hugh," continued Lavinia, with her tearful countenance upturned towards the Duke; "if there be anything I can do to contribute to your happiness—or if my presence be hateful to you, tell me so, and I will leave you——"

"Ah! you would abandon me?" ejaculated the Duke, scarcely knowing at the moment what he was saying—but probably speaking from the impulse of one who felt that he was not in a position to part with a single friend who was in any way interested in his welfare: "you would abandon me?—and perhaps you would league yourself with my enemies?"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Lavinia vehemently: "never, never! But, Oh! your words are a revelation! You have enemies? Tell me who they are: tell me how their enmity is developing itself. Oh! now, my dear Hugh, you can put my affection to the test—and you will see that I have really known how to forgive and forget all the past!"

"Ah, this constant recurrence to the past!" ejaculated the Duke impatiently.

"I meant it not as a reproach—much less as an

offence," said Lavinia, deprecatingly and earnestly. "I only wish you to understand that I am the same towards you in respect to my duty as I ever was: and it requires but one kind word from your lips to make me the same towards you in respect to love."

There are times when the hearts of even the vilest and most worthless of men are susceptible of the influence of woman's love, and when the softness of that feminine devotion has an ineffable soothing balm for the wounded spirit, even though that spirit be tortured by the suicidal inflictions of its own crimes. Such was the state of the Duke of Marchmont now; and a strong revulsion of feeling took place within him. For a long period he had hated his wife—he had treated her with cold neglect, as well as with flagrant indignity: but now all of a sudden his heart seemed to warm towards her—he looked upon her countenance—he saw that it was tearful—and he knew that those tears were flowing for himself!

"Yes, Lavinia," he said, "I am unhappy—and I have enemies! I do not deserve this kindness at your hands—I feel that I do not!"

"Oh, my dearest husband!" murmured the Duchess, taking his hand and pressing it to her lips: "you have spoken to me in a tone and in a manner which in one sense has given me happiness, but which in another has filled me with affliction. You seem to promise me a restoration of your love and confidence; and it is this that makes me happy. On the other hand, you tell me that you yourself are unhappy and that you have enemies; and it is this which smites me with sadness. Who are these enemies of yours? If you have given them a right to persecute you, may they not be moved by the intercessions of a woman?—and if without reason they are persecuting you, may they not be turned into a right path by the remonstrances of your wife, on whose head would redound any evil which happened to yourself?"

"Lavinia," answered the Duke, as an idea struck him, "it is possible that you can serve me ——yes, yes—you can if you will!"

"And I will!" exclaimed the Duchess vehemently: "you know that I will!" she added with impassioned energy. "Oh! it would indeed delight me to be of service to you—to dispel the cloud from your brow—to give back peace to your looks! Tell me how all this may be done. And ah! now I bethink me, if the revelations you may have to make be of a character to unveil some weakness on your part, think not for an instant that I shall retreat from my pledge, or that I shall with the less energy undertake whatsoever mission you may confide to me!"

"You are sure of this, Lavinia?" said the Duke impressively, and gazing upon her with earnestness. "Come now—pause and reflect. I know the purity of your nature—I know the delicacy of your mind; and if anything should transpire at all calculated to shock you——"

"Set at rest these apprehensions," said the Duchess: "I beseech you to banish them from your mind. Oh! so far from shrinking at the task which I am undertaking, I accept it with cheerfulness: for I may perhaps hope that it will revive somewhat of your love towards me."

"Lavinia," rejoined the Duke in a low deep voice, while he gazed fixedly upon his wife, "I shall experience the deepest gratitude towards you; and gratitude, you know, is a sentiment which under certain circumstances expands into love. On the other hand, I fear lest the love you experience for me——"

"Will be impaired?" ejaculated the Duchess. "No, no—impossible! Give me an opportunity of proving my love—and I shall love you all the more for having done this. I do not deceive you as to my motives——I am seeking the return of your confidence and of your love. This I would purchase at almost any price; and therefore think not that the past in respect to yourself will shock me. I shall look upon it as something to be forgotten!"

"I thank you beforehand, Lavinia—yes, beforehand accept my gratitude!" exclaimed the Duke. "But no more to-night! To-morrow I will tell you what it is that I require at your hands. Return to your guests at once——and again, Lavinia, accept my gratitude!"

The Duke took her hand and raised it to his lips. It was not altogether an act of dissimulation, nor for the purpose of cajoling one whom he sought to render serviceable in the terrible difficulties of his position: but it was that in the midst of these difficulties he found one who was prepared to befriend him and who would devote herself to his cause. Lavinia, by her amiable conduct, was making a wife's love necessary as it were to a man who had hitherto proved a vile husband: she was exercising that soft feminine influence to which we have before alluded, and at the very moment when it was so much needed to soothe and strengthen the tortured spirit of him who was thus brought to acknowledge it. He took her hand, we say: but she, bursting into tears, threw herself into his arms, weeping and sobbing convulsively. There was happiness and there was sorrow in her soul: there was joy and there was grief,—joy at being thus enabled to play the part of the ministering angel—but grief at the thought that her husband should have woes and cares requiring such ministration. Yes—she sank upon his breast; and as the Duke contemplated that beautifully handsome woman—now only in her thirty-third year—whose tall figure was so finely formed—and the masses of whose light auburn hair floated upon shoulders and a neck of dazzling whiteness,—when he saw the large blue eyes upturned towards him, looking so beautiful in their tenderness, even through their tears,—when, in a word, his glance swept over the entire assemblage of charms which graced his wife, the Duke of Marchmont felt that his soul was touched, and a pang of remorse smote him on account of all his past conduct towards her. His arms encircled her waist—he strained her to his heart; and in a broken voice he murmured, "Would to heaven, Lavinia, that I had ever remained worthy of such a love as this!"

The Duchess besought her husband not to allude painfully to the past; and wiping away her tears, she smiled sweetly upon him,—observing, "You are about to put my devotion to the test: fear not that it will recoil from aught which may transpire while working in your cause. You know not, my dear husband, how far a woman's devotion may extend!"

"To-morrow, Lavinia—to-morrow," rejoined the

Duke. "I will tell you what you are to do for me, and how you may serve my cause."

The Duchess again smiled sweetly upon her husband, and then quitted the room.

"Yes—she can serve me," said the Duke to himself as soon as he was again alone. "She is loving, and she is faithful; and whatever may come to her knowledge, she at least will not betray me. No, no—she will assist me until the very last!"

But as the reader may have understood, the amiable Lavinia little suspected how deeply her husband had immersed himself in the flood of iniquity: she could conceive no greater amount of guilt than that of which he had been culpable towards herself, as recorded in some of the earlier chapters of this narrative. She had vowed that she would not suffer herself to be deterred by aught which might come to her knowledge while acting on his behalf; and the affectionate lady revelled in dreams of comfort and happiness, peace and love, to be enjoyed with him towards whom she was exhibiting so much magnanimous devotion.

The newspapers of the following morning contained a paragraph relative to the occurrence at Indora's villa; and it may be as well for us to make the reader aware of the extent to which the particulars thereof had transpired. The paragraph ran in the ensuing manner:—

"MYSTERIOUS ATTEMPT AT ASSASSINATION.—A beautiful and somewhat secluded villa, situated in the neighbourhood of Bayswater and Notting Hill, was last evening the scene of a crime which is enveloped in considerable mystery. The villa thus alluded to, is inhabited by an Eastern lady of rank and fortune, who, it is believed, was impelled by oriosity to visit our shores. Amongst the domestics in the service of the Lady Indora, is a beautiful Hindoo woman, named Sagoonah. Last evening Sagoonah, while walking in the garden attached to the villa, was assailed by some unknown miscreant, who inflicted upon her a severe wound with a knife or other sharp instrument. The cry which the unfortunate woman uttered, reached the ears of the Lady Indora; and her ladyship, accompanied by some guests whom she was entertaining at the time, rushed forth into the garden. The unfortunate Sagoonah was discovered senseless on the ground, wounded in the manner already described; and she was at once conveyed into the house. Surgical assistance was immediately procured; and we are happy in being enabled to state that there is no reason to despair of Sagoonah's eventual recovery. The police were quickly informed of the circumstance; and on examining the premises, they traced the footsteps of the assassin for some little distance, until the marks altogether disappeared. The Lady Indora is quite unable to account for the murderous attack made upon her dependant; and thus for the present the deed is enveloped in the darkest mystery."

Such was the paragraph inserted in the morning journals: and the Duke of Marchmont was thereby made aware of the fact that it was the ayah Sagoonah who had been stricken by the Burker's weapon. He could only account for it by the conjecture that the Burker must have made some extraordinary mistake: but his mind was relieved of a considerable load, inasmuch as it was evident that Indora was maintaining a profound silence in respect to her knowledge that he himself was the instigator of a crime of which it was intended that she should be the victim.

On the morning of which we are speaking, the Duke was breakfasting with his wife; and while reading the newspaper, he gave vent to an ejaculation which startled her Grace.

"This is extraordinary!" he exclaimed: and directing Lavinia's attention to the paragraph, he bade her peruse it.

"It is dreadful!" observed the Duchess when she had read the brief narrative. "But why did it elicit that ejaculation from your lips?"

"Because, my dear Lavinia," the Duke answered, addressing her in those affectionate terms to which she had long been so completely unaccustomed, "it is to this very villa that you are to proceed for me—and it is this self-same Lady Indora whom you are to see."

The Duchess was astonished at these announcements: but still not for a single instant did she imagine that her husband could have any connexion with the crime recorded in the paragraph. She accordingly said, "You have only to express your wishes, Hugh, and they shall be fulfilled."

"I told you, Lavinia, last night," continued the Duke, "that I have enemies who are working against me; and the Lady Indora is one. Ah! I see that the colour mounts to your cheeks—but your suspicion is wrong: there has been no unlawful connexion between that Eastern lady and myself. Do not ask me to explain anything——"

"No. Tell me how to act," said Lavinia, "and blindfold will I obey you."

"Go to Indora's villa," proceeded the Duke of Marchmont; "ask for an interview with her ladyship—tell her who you are—say that you are the Duchess of Marchmont—and then——"

"And then?" said Lavinia, perceiving that her husband hesitated.

"And then," proceeded the Duke, "tell Indora that you have heard from my lips that she is at war with me: say that without having given you the slightest details, I have nevertheless acknowledged that she has reason to complain against me—use all the power of your intercession that there may be peace between us—hesitate not, Lavinia, to humble yourself, if necessary, in the presence of that Eastern lady—when addressing her, speak as the wife of him with whom she is thus at war—nay, if needful, go down upon your knees and beg that for your own sake that hostility may cease!"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Lavinia, a blighting, withering suspicion now darting in unto her mind: and while becoming deadly pale, she glanced towards the newspaper.

The Duke, averting his countenance, affected not to have caught that ejaculation from his wife's lips, nor to perceive the agitation which had smitten her: and he said, "You have promised, you know, to obey me blindfold! You have already won my gratitude—and if you value my love, *that* likewise will become your's."

The Duchess was about to implore her husband in impassioned terms to set at rest the horrible suspicion which had just flashed in unto her mind,—when she said to herself, "No, it is impossible!—he is incapable of such a deed! Besides, it happened to the servant—and naught can regard her which may have passed between her mistress and him!"

Then the Duchess felt glad in her own mind that she had kept back the words that she was about to utter: for she fancied that they would have been outrageously insulting to her husband.

Besides, when she now again looked at him, and saw that he had a calm demeanour, she naturally supposed that he himself could not have for an instant conjectured that such a suspicion had entered her mind.

"And when am I to go?" she asked: "when shall I pay this visit to the Lady Indora?"

"Without delay, Lavinia," responded the Duke. "Let the carriage be ordered—and proceed thither at once. Perhaps it would be as well if you were to prepare a note beforehand, containing some such words as these:—'The Duchess of Marchmont earnestly requests an immediate interview with the Lady Indora.'—This will ensure you admission: whereas if you merely sent in your card, it might be refused. Will you do all this, Lavinia?—and will you likewise promise me that whatever you may hear—whatever the Lady Indora may tell you——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Duchess hurriedly: "I faithfully promise that whatever she may tell me, shall not deter me from my purpose of serving your cause to the best of my endeavours!"

Thus speaking, Lavinia hastened from the room, to prepare her toilet for the visit which she had to pay. Again had that withering, blighting suspicion flashed in unto her mind in spite of herself: for it struck her at the moment that she beheld something peculiar in her husband's look:—and then, too, that constant reiteration of the entreaty that she would not be shocked at anything she might hear concerning him, naturally excited the suspicion which connected the Duke in some way or another with the paragraph in the newspaper. But Lavinia was resolved to perform her promise;—and doing her best to dispel that sickening suspicion, she took her seat in the carriage which was to bear her to Indora's villa.

We will not dwell upon the various conflicting ideas which agitated the mind of the Duchess as she was conveyed towards her destination. She shuddered as the carriage halted at the gate leading into the grounds where so foul a deed had been perpetrated on the previous night; and she inwardly murmured, "Heaven forbid that the hostility which seems to exist between this lady and my husband, can have any reference to an episode so terrible as *that*—or that it forms one of the causes of offence for which I am to humble myself even to the kneeling at her feet!"

The summons at the gate was answered by the faithful Mark,—who, perceiving a splendid equipage with a ducal coronet upon the panels, hastened to the carriage-window, to which a beautiful lady was beckoning him.

"Have the kindness," said Lavinia, "to give my card and this note to the Lady Indora, and I will await any message you may bring back."

Christina Ashton had gone with her brother to pay a visit to Isabella Vincent; and Indora was alone in the drawing-room, when at about the hour of noon the ducal equipage drove up to her gate. She wondered who the visitress could be: for she caught a glimpse of Lavinia as her Grace leant forward at the carriage-window to give the note and card to Mark. The reader may imagine the Queen's astonishment when her faithful major-domo entered with that card and that billet. Mark himself perceived the amazement of his mistress: but that expression of surprise quickly passed away from Indora's countenance; and she said to Mark, "You can introduce her Grace hither."

Indora knew perfectly well that Lavinia was a lady of stainless reputation, noted for her amiable and excellent qualities, and whose character afforded a striking contrast with that of her ducal husband. She had therefore granted the audience after a very brief hesitation: but during the few minutes which elapsed until the Duchess of Marchmont was introduced, Indora was engaged in a thousand conjectures as to what the object of this visit could possibly mean.

Lavinia was introduced; and Indora rose to receive her. Mark at once retired: the Queen and the Duchess were now alone together: but the latter knew not that it was a lady of Sovereign rank in whose presence she thus found herself. The very first glances which they threw upon one another produced mutually favourable impressions. The extraordinary beauty of the Queen struck Lavinia with astonishment as well as with admiration: while the modestly-dignified demeanour, and feminine air of self-confidence—frank, open, lofty, and yet utterly exempt from boldness—which characterized her Majesty, at once proclaimed the high-minded, well-principled, pure-hearted woman. On the other hand, the more soft and winning beauty of Lavinia—the pensiveness which habitually rested in her large blue eyes—and the half-entreating air with which she bestowed the salutations of courtesy upon Indora, at once riveted the interest of that Eastern lady.

They sate down together; and the Duchess began by apologizing for the intrusion of such a visit on the part of a perfect stranger. She spoke in the low fluid tremulous voice which indicated a distressed and suspenseful state of mind,—while her looks softly but eloquently implored the Queen's consideration and forbearance.

"Your Grace need offer no apology," replied Indora; "for by the tenour of your note, brief though its contents be, I am led to conjecture that some business of importance has procured me the honour of this visit?"

"It is indeed of great importance to myself—and—and—to *another!*" responded Lavinia tremulously. "But first let me ask how fares it with your servant?"—and here the voice of the Duchess quivered and faltered more and more: "for I have read that paragraph in the newspaper."

"My servant lies in a very dangerous condition. She is totally unconscious: but still the medical attendant gives hope of her eventual recovery:"—and as Indora thus spoke, she fixed her dark eyes earnestly upon the Duchess as if to fathom the motives of this visit.

"My present proceeding must have already appeared most singular," continued Lavinia, scarcely knowing how to approach the subject which she had to explain; "and perhaps when my purpose is made known, it may appear more singular still ——But, Oh, madam! whatever cause of offence my husband may have given you, I beseech your ladyship to pardon him!"

Again did Indora fix her eyes upon the Duchess: for she was full of wonderment as to the extent of the revelations which the Duke might have made to his wife, and to what topics such revelations might refer. Lavinia suspected what was passing in the Queen's mind; and she hastened to say,

"Of those causes of offence I am utterly ignorant, Lady Indora. All that the Duke has told me, is that he has offended you—that you have the power to injure him—that you *are* exercising this power——And, Oh! he is very, very unhappy! But he implores your forbearance—he beseeches you to accept the assurance of his contrition: he would have come to you if he had dared—but on his behalf do I kneel at your feet!"

And with these words, Lavinia sank down to a suppliant posture,—taking Indora's hand and pressing it with the warmth of entreaty, while she looked up with imploring gaze into Indora's countenance. The Queen was profoundly touched by the pathos of this appeal: she saw in a moment that the Duke was making a blind and uninformed instrument of his wife——and she pitied her.

"Rise, madam," she said: "it is not for you to kneel at my feet: although——But rise, I conjure you! Oh, now you weep, Duchess of Marchmont!—and I cannot bear to behold these tears!"

"Lady, you are all goodness," murmured Lavinia: "yes, I read your character in your countenance! You will not be stern and unrelenting! Of whatsoever offences my husband may be guilty—and I seek not to know them——"

"Madam, rest assured," interrupted the Queen, with a true queenly dignity, "that my honour has suffered not——"

"No, no, lady!" cried the Duchess: "purity and virtue are stamped upon your countenance: they are delineated in your looks! Good heavens! not for a moment would I insult you with such a suspicion. I am entirely at your mercy—I place myself in your hands. If you think fit to narrate the offences of my husband towards you in order to convince me of the magnitude of your generosity in pardoning them, I shall listen: but if on the other hand you will spare me that which my own heart tells me cannot be otherwise than painful—and if you will pardon him all the same—Oh! I shall bless you—I shall love you as my benefactress!"

"Rise, lady—rise, Duchess of Marchmont!" said Indora, in a tremulous voice, and at the same time wiping away a tear. "You have given me no offence—you come in the candour and frankness of your own innocence—you must not kneel as a suppliant——"

"Lady—dear lady—I will kneel," continued the Duchess, "until you grant me this boon. Oh, you know not how much depends upon it! I saw my husband wretched and unhappy: I implored his confidence. He told me that he had enemies—and that you were one. He bade me come to you—and I am here! Grant him your pardon, dear lady—and he will give me back his love as a reward for procuring that forgiveness. You see how much is at stake! It is in your power to restore me that happiness which for years I have lost. Do this, dear lady, and I will love you as a sister! Ah, you weep! you are moved—you will accede to my prayer!"

"Rise, Duchess of Marchmont," again said Indora, but now speaking in a voice which was all tremulous with emotions. "Return to your husband—tell him that for all he has ever done towards me, I forgive him for your sake."

"Dearest, dearest lady!" ejaculated the Duchess, pressing Indora's hand to her lips, and then starting up from her suppliant posture; "you have poured joy into my heart—you have already filled my soul with happiness——"

"But understand me well, madam," interrupted the Queen; "I forgive your husband for whatsoever he may have done towards *myself*. Be particular in conveying my decision in the very terms wherein I express it."

"But what means this reservation?" asked Lavinia, her beautiful countenance suddenly becoming so pensively mournful that it went to Indora's heart to be unable to give her such an assurance as would send her away completely happy. "There is something in your words which I cannot understand: there is, as I have expressed it, a reservation——"

"Your husband will comprehend my meaning," answered Indora; "and he will at least thank your Grace for what you have done. Return to him, and say those words—that for his offences against myself I forgive him for *your* sake. Fail not to say that it is for *your* sake!"

"Ah, I comprehend!" exclaimed the Duchess, apparently awakening from the stupor of bewilderment: "there is some one else in whom you are interested, and against whom my husband has offended! Oh, is it possible? can it be really true that——"

Lavinia stopped short, and sank upon the sofa, overpowered by her feelings. Against whom could her husband have thus offended, if not against Sagoonah? For must not Indora be interested on behalf of her servant? and was it not on this account that she was making such a mental reservation? And now, too, the Queen looked distressed; for she failed not to fathom what was passing in the mind of the Duchess: she comprehended full well the nature of the suspicion which Lavinia entertained.

"Return to the Duke, madam," said the Queen, in a tremulous voice; "return to him, and deliver the message which you have already received from my lips."

The Duchess would have said more: she would have renewed her entreaties—she would again have fallen at the Queen's feet: but her emotions were too strong for the power of utterance—and she remained riveted like a statue to the spot. One last effort did she make to give vent to an impassioned intercession: but she could not—she dared stay no longer—and abruptly pressing the Queen's hand, she hastened from the apartment. When again seated in her carriage, Lavinia threw herself back and burst into an agony of tears: for she could no longer doubt that her own husband was in some unaccountable way connected with the assassin-attempt upon Sagoonah.

Nevertheless, as the reader may have perhaps already imagined, the mental reservation made by Indora referred not to Sagoonah——but unto *another!*

CHAPTER CXLIV.

THE PASTILLES.

We must now return to the Burker, whom we left when issuing forth from the Duke of Marchmont's

mansion with a purse which by the feel he knew to be well filled with notes and gold. Making his way to some low public-house with which he was acquainted—but where at the same time he felt very sure that he should not be recognised in his Jewish garb—the miscreant regaled himself with plenty of refreshment in the shape of strong liquor—having partaken of which, he retired to bed. It was his purpose to leave the metropolis on the following day, and get to some seaport, whence he might embark for France. We need hardly observe that he took very good care to reckon over the contents of the purse; and he found that the Duke of Marchmont had not deceived him; but that the amount was larger than the recompense promised for the crime in respect to Indora.

In the morning the Burker obtained an early sight of the newspaper; and he read the same paragraph which has already been presented to our readers. Nothing could exceed the astonishment of the Burker on finding how tremendous a mistake he had committed: he sate for some minutes utterly lost in amazement at the discovery of this startling fact. Yet how did it matter to him since he had pocketed the reward? But then a thought was gradually stealing into the Burker's mind. It was the death of Indora for which the Duke had bargained; and the same motives, whatever they were, which had prompted his Grace to desire that lady's assassination, must still exist. Thus did Mr. Barnes reason within himself; and thence he calculated that another reward as ample as the one he had just received might possibly be forthcoming from the Duke for the consummation of that crime. Greedy of gold as he was unscrupulous in conduct, he seriously reflected whether it would not be worth his while to remain in London until the night—obtain an interview with the Duke—and ascertain his views on the subject. Barney was of dauntless courage in

pursuing his career of crime; and his many adventures of the last few months—his escapes, which he termed his "triumphs"—together with the success which had hitherto attended the assumption of his disguises, had tended to embolden him to an almost reckless extent. His mind was therefore made up: he would remain in London until the night at all events; and if the Duke acceded to his proposal, he would undertake the new venture—or rather, we should say, the fearfully correct perpetration of the one originally confided to him.

It by no means suited the Burker's disposition to remain in-doors all day at the public-house; and moreover such a circumstance in itself would look suspicious. He felt convinced that he was disguised in a style impenetrable to the eyes of the detectives; and there was a sort of thrilling pleasure in thus setting their keenness at naught. He therefore issued forth; but speedily becoming wearied of wandering about, he bethought himself of an expedient which promised some little amusement, and which at the same time would enable him to sit down and rest for hours on some convenient spot. The idea was one which had been suggested during his conversation with Jack Smedley at the time he assumed the Jew's dress at that individual's lodgings;—and this idea was to procure a small tray and some pastilles. The articles were speedily purchased; and behold, at about two o'clock in the afternoon, the Burker settled himself on the door-steps of an empty house in one of the thoroughfares at the West End of the town.

While there stationed, Barney the Burker reflected upon many things—and amongst others, upon his most recent proceedings in respect to Jack Smedley.

"Jack's a nasty cowardly dog," said the Burker to himself; "or else he wouldn't have played me such a scampish trick as that,—getting hold of my blunt and bolting off like a shot! But I was even with him though: I precious soon made the scoundrel disgorge, as the sayin' is. Nevertheless, he is a dirty rascal; and if he could have his revenge, he would be sure to take it fast enough. But one thing is certain: he wouldn't go and give hisself up merely to have the pleasure of informing agin me; and it's unkimmon sure that he couldn't inform against me unless he *did* give hisself up. So all things considered, I don't think there's no harm to be afeerd on in that there quarter."

Mr. Barnes had arrived at this satisfactory conclusion, when on raising his eyes, whom should he behold crossing the street and advancing towards him, but old Jonathan Carnabie? The sexton of Woodbridge did not look by any means the better for his debauch of the night but one previously: on the contrary, he was pale and ill, and seemed as if he had arisen from a bed of sickness. The fact was that the stupefying drug used by the Burker, had produced a very injurious effect on the sexton.

"By jingo, I'm done for!" said the Burker to himself, as Jonathan advanced straight towards him: "he'll twig me through this cussed black gaberdine and this thunderin' grey beard——But I'm a fool! Old Jonathan's eyes isn't half so sharp as the detective chaps' wisual organs; and *they* can't see through me no more than if I was one of them postesses. I'll look as serious as if I'd just come out of the sinnygog."

"How do you sell your pastilles, my good old man?" inquired the sexton of Woodbridge, fumbling at the bottom of his pockets for a few halfpence.

The Burker answered the question very curtly indeed, but imitating the Jewish accent as much as he could; for he had not forgotten the conversation he had overheard at the public-house on the preceding night, when it was stated that Jonathan Carnabie had been struck by his "lingo" at the time he was beguiling him with tales of his respectability.

"Well, I'll buy a few pastilles," said Jonathan: "for my landlady seems to be very fond of them—and as she is exceedingly kind and civil, I must make her a little present."

The Burker received the copper coins—gave the suitable number of pastilles—and eyeing the old sexton askance, hoped that he would at once take himself off. But it was not so. Jonathan possessed an inquiring disposition: and he thought that as he had come to London, it was his duty to make himself acquainted with every matter on which he was previously uninformed, and however trivial its interest.

"I never saw pastilles before I came to this great city," he said. "How are they made?"

"Chalk," was the curt response.

"Chalk? indeed!" said Mr. Carnabie. "What! black chalk? I never heard of it before."

"Charcoal, then," growled the Burker, inwardly venting a bitter imprecation against the old sexton's visual organs and limbs.

"Ah! charcoal, eh? And how are they scented?"

"Don't know?" rejoined the Burker.

Old Jonathan—suspecting not for a single instant who it was that stood thus disguised before him—said in a somewhat angry tone, "Well, at all events you might give a person a civil answer—particularly when he has laid out money with you."

But the Burker vouchsafed no response; and Jonathan walked away, muttering something sulkily between his teeth.

"He didn't know me—he didn't suspect nuffin!" thought the Burker chucklingly to himself. "The old rascal! I thought at one moment his eyes was a piercing like needles through this here gaberdine and beard. Howsomever——"

At this moment the Burker beheld the Duke of Marchmont advancing on foot along the street. His Grace had just come from assisting at the installation of Mrs. Oxenden in a splendidly furnished house which he had taken for her reception; and he was gratified on finding that such was her love of pleasure and of gold, she would be sure to keep ten thousand secrets relative to as many crimes, if it only suited her selfish purposes. Such was the impression he had formed of her during an hour's conversation; and he felt himself safe enough in that quarter. But was he so in other respects? His wife had faithfully reported the particulars and the issue of her interview with Indora; and therefore if he were satisfied in respect to Mrs. Oxenden, he was full of apprehensions in respect to the Oriental lady.

"She will forgive me all that I have done towards *herself*!" the Duke kept thinking within

his own mind as he slowly paced along: "but this means that she will not or cannot forgive me in respect to what I have done towards others in whom she is interested. And all things considered in whom can she be so interested as in *him* who is assuredly alive—who is in England—and whom I have seen? Yes—they must be well acquainted—it is only too evident; and her visit to Oaklands was a trick—a stratagem, devised on his behalf—doubtless suggested by him too! It is this eastern woman only whom I fear: it is Indora only whom I apprehend. Were she out of the way, *he* would become powerless: he dares not come forward—he is compelled to work through the means of an agent. Yes—if Indora were put out of my path, I should feel myself safe——I might defy the whole world!"

Here the Duke of Marchmont suddenly stopped short, not only in his musings but likewise in his walk: for on raising his eyes, whom should he behold at the distance of a dozen yards but Barney the Burker? The Duke could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses: and yet it was so. There stood Barney dressed in the Jewish costume, with his tray of pastilles in his hand.

"This fellow is mad, to remain thus in London!" thought the Duke within himself: but the next instant a feeling of joy shot through his heart.

Drawing out his purse, and keeping it in his hand, so as to have the appearance of being about to bestow alms on the seeming Jewish mendicant, the Duke accosted him. There were very few people passing by at the time: and not a policeman was in sight.

"What are you doing here?" inquired Marchmont, in a hurried manner and in a low voice, as he still kept playing with his purse for appearance' sake.

"A sellin' of these werry pretty little things at a werry moderate rate," responded the Burker. "But jokin' apart, my lord—I was only a killin' time until evening should draw in—when I meant to take some steps to get an interview with your Grace."

"What for?" demanded the Duke hastily.

"Only, my lord," was the reply, "because the business wasn't done proper last night—though, by jingo! it wasn't my fault: for if that cussed young woman chose to tog herself out in her missus's dress, how the deuce was I to know anythink about it? She had a veil down over her face——"

"Yes, yes—I have read all about it," interrupted the Duke; "and I see full well that it was a mistake on your part. I do not blame you——"

"And that there mistake," rejoined the Burker, "can be put all right and straight; and the proper goose can be cooked if your lordship chooses to say the word."

"Meet me this evening in the lane at the back of my stables," said the Duke hurriedly: and then, with an appearance of ostentation for the behoof of the passers-by, he flung a shilling into the Burker's tray.

"There! I knowed how it would be," thought Barney to himself: "these here aristocratic chaps always will have their way when they once takes it into their head; and as it suits my lord's purpose that the Lady Indoors is to have her hash settled, settled it will be! But, by jingo! here's that old scoundrel again!"

This mental ejaculation bore reference to old Jonathan Carnabie, who was returning down the street; and for an instant the Burker thought of pitching away his stock-in-trade and taking to his heels. But now there were several persons passing at the moment; and such a proceeding would naturally excite suspicion that there was something wrong: whereas in respect to Jonathan it might be a false alarm after all. The Burker's gaze swept rapidly up and down the street: no policeman was in sight—no one who at all answered to his tolerably accurate notion or knowledge of a detective. Therefore the Burker remained at his post—but inwardly resolving to decamp the instant Jonathan Carnabie should be again out of sight. It must be admitted that he now cursed the unnecessary folly which had exposed him to such perils; and his mind was by no means reassured when he beheld the sexton of Woodbridge making straight towards him. But as he drew near, the Burker saw that he had a pleasant and agreeable expression of countenance; and he said within himself, "I wonder what the old dog wants now?"

"I will buy a few more of your pastilles," said Jonathan. "My landlady tells me that they are exceedingly cheap, and also very good."

"How many?" asked the Burker, in a feigned voice, and at the same time imitating as well as he was able the accents of a Jew of the lower order.

Jonathan stated the number he required, and drew forth the price. The Burker pocketed the money, still eyeing the old sexton askance: but there was really nothing in Jonathan's looks to warrant his apprehension. But we must leave these two individuals for a few minutes thus standing together, while we relate some particulars which are essential to the progress of our story.

As the reader has seen, rewards had been offered for the apprehension of the Smedleys and the Burker; and we may add that no efforts had been left untried by the police to get upon the track of either or all of these individuals. The horrible revelations made by the subterranean of the gold-beater's house in Lambeth, had excited the public feeling to a high degree; and the officers of justice therefore considered it absolutely necessary that the miscreants should be hunted down and brought to the bar of a criminal tribunal. But if in such a case it were desirable to capture a particular one rather than the others, this one was the Burker. His complicity in the hideous murder of the lawyer Pollard at Liverpool—his escape from the gaol in that town—and his daring, desperate conduct towards the police-officials at the Smedleys' house, were motives in addition to all others which rendered it absolutely necessary for the security of society that such a diabolic fiend should be cut short in his iniquitous career. But, as we have seen, the Burker as well as the Smedleys had hitherto evaded the pursuit of justice.

The Secretary for the Home Department, acting upon the representations of the police authorities, determined to take a step which it was hoped would have the effect of bringing the gang of miscreants within the range of the law's operation. Hand-

bills were accordingly printed, proclaiming that the mercy of the Crown would be to a certain degree extended to any one of the gang (the Burker himself excepted) who would give such information as should place the others in the hands of the police; or the same benefits would be extended to that one of the said gang who would surrender up the Burker alone to the authorities. These bills were printed early on the morning of which we have been writing; and they began to be circulated in the metropolis at the time the Burker took his station at the West End, disguised as a Jew, and with his tray of pastilles before him.

The police-officers were active in scattering the bills amidst the low quarters of London,—knowing that in these districts they were far more likely to have the effect of attaining their object than in the superior districts of the metropolis. It happened that one of the first of these printed proclamations that were issued, fell into the hands of Jack Smedley, as in some new disguise he was wandering through the district of St. Luke's in as wretched a state of mind as can be well conceived. On reading the handbill, the gold-beater was at once smitten with the thought of availing himself of the benefit which it held out. He understood its meaning full well: it signified that whoever would turn round upon his accomplices should experience the mercy of the Crown so far as to have his life spared, though with the certainty of sustaining the application of the next degree of punishment,—namely, transportation for the rest of his days.

Jack Smedley was, as the reader has seen, a veritable coward in most respects — although having hardihood sufficient to plunge into crime when led on, encouraged, and assisted by others. But the idea of the gibbet was for him fraught with such terrors that it was a matter of surprise it had not restrained him from crime altogether: —unless indeed we must take into account the circumstance that every man when committing a deed of turpitude, hugs the belief that it will never be discovered. And now, upon reading this proclamation, Jack Smedley beheld the means of saving his life—Aye! and not only of saving his life, but also of revenging himself on the Burker for the last event which had marked their intercourse. What to Smedley was transportation for the remainder of his existence, if he could only save that existence from a horrible and ignominious fate? To have the power of putting out from his imagination that dark sinister object which was looming before his mental vision—to escape from the haunting influence of the sombre gallows and all the dread paraphernalia of death, —this were indeed happiness, although at the same time he should be doomed to fix his eyes on the far-off regions of eternal exile! Not many moments did the gold-beater waste in deliberation: his mind was speedily made up; and with the proclamation in his hand, he set out on his search after Barney the Burker.

We have said that he was wearing a new sort of disguise: but it is not worth while to pause and describe its details. Suffice it to say, that profiting by the hints which he had received from the Burker the evening but one previous, he had made such alterations in his appearance as were indeed well calculated to defy the scrutiny of the most lynx-eyed detective. Accordingly, he made his way through the streets of London, without exciting any suspicion, and without attracting towards himself a single suspicious look on the part of any constable whom he encountered. He knew enough of the Burker's desperate character to be well aware that if he were still in the metropolis, he was just as likely to be haunting one of the best neighbourhoods as to be lurking about in one of the worst.

"He is pretty sure," thought Jack Smedley within himself, "to keep on that old Hebrew disguise: for he knows it to be the best he could possibly have; and notwithstanding what took place betwixt him and me, he can't for a moment fancy that I should think of betraying him. Therefore it isn't on my account he would leave London. Besides, didn't he tell me that he had got a little business in hand which would keep him here for a few days?—and Barney is not the man to make himself scarce before his work is done. Depend upon it he *is* in London!—and if so, I will have him. My own life depends upon it! Aye —and for that matter, I would give up Bab likewise——Anything to save myself from swinging on the gallows! Besides, hasn't Bab led me a precious life—always teasing and tormenting me —calling me a coward—domineering over me—making me do exactly what she chose—ordering me about as if I was her slave? Yes, yes!—I have no compunction now: my own safety is all that I have to think of!"

Such were the thoughts which passed through Jack Smedley's mind as he wandered about the streets of London searching for the Burker. At length, while making his way through a quarter at the West End, just as he reached the top of a street into which he was about to turn, he caught sight of a dress the aspect of which instantaneously sent a thrill of joy through his heart. It was assuredly the Burker!—there could be no mistake! The beard—the hat—the gaberdine,—all were the same!—and then, too, he was evidently selling pastilles; and in his discourse with Smedley at the lodgings of the latter, he had with coarse jocularity declared that it only required this addition to the circumstances of his disguise in order to render that disguise complete.

Jack Smedley literally trembled with the feelings that now agitated him. The safety of his own life appeared to be within his reach:—but what if the Burker should still escape him? He flung his glances hurriedly up and down the street: not a policeman was to be seen. He looked again towards the Burker; and he now beheld him in discourse with a strange-looking old man, whom our readers will recognise as Jonathan Carnabic. Again did the gold-beater fling his glances around: but still no policeman!—and he did not dare leave the spot—he did not dare lose sight of Barney the Burker for even a single minute, lest that minute should be sufficient to enable him to vanish altogether.

Jonathan Carnabic had now finished his second bargain with the Burker, and was moving away: he was coming in the direction of that extremity of the street where Jack Smedley posted himself. But, ah! the Burker was retreating in the opposite direction. The gold-beater's first impulse was to give the alarm—to cry "Stop thief!" and thus set numbers upon his track. But a second thought

convinced him of the impolicy of this proceeding. In the first place, the Burker might possibly escape: Smedley was not well acquainted with this particular quarter of the town, and he knew not what bye-streets might lead off from the main one along which Barney was now proceeding. And then again, it was just possible that it might not be Barney at all—but a veritable Hebrew who had happened to wear a costume precisely similar to that which Smedley had lent to his accomplice. All these considerations passed with lightning speed through the mind of the gold-beater; and for a few instants he was bewildered how to act. A thought however struck him; and he accosted Jonathan Carnabie.

"You were talking to that old Jew?" he said, with quick utterance.

"I was buying pastilles of him," responded the sexton, somewhat startled by this abrupt address from a total stranger.

"Did you see nothing queer in his look, sir?" demanded Jack—"nothing of a hang-dog expression of countenance?"

"Well, I did not take particular notice," replied Jonathan: "but now that you mention the circumstance——"

"Did he look like a Jew, sir?" exclaimed Jack Smedley. "But did you happen to notice whether there was a rent in the front part of his gaberdine—just about here?"—and the gold-beater indicated the left breast of his own coat.

"To be sure!" rejoined the old sexton: "I did observe it. But what——"

"It's all right, then!" ejaculated Smedley. "And now, sir, pray be good enough to hasten back after that Jew—just get him into conversation—do anything to engage his attention for a few minutes! He is an old scamp—the police are looking for him—but don't let him know that there is anything suspicious!"

"Dear me!" said Jonathan; "what a place this London is!"

"Pray be off, sir, and do as I ask you! You will have time to overtake him! There! he is stopping!—a woman is buying something of him! Be off with you, sir—and keep him engaged for a few minutes!"

Jonathan Carnabie accordingly retraced his way—while Jack Smedley, full of feverish suspense, again looked round in search of a policeman. Meanwhile the Burker, thankful at having got rid of the Woodbridge sexton, had been beating a retreat as fast as his assumed character of an old Jew would permit him to proceed; and he was near the extremity of the street when he was stopped by an elderly dame who began to bargain with him for some pastilles. The Burker inwardly vented his rage at being thus detained, by means of a bitter imprecation; and he gruffly bade the dame take as many pastilles as she chose and pay for them exactly what she liked. But she was a slow-going old creature: she counted a pile of pastilles with the utmost deliberation; and then she fumbled in her pocket for some halfpence to pay for the purchase. The Burker—who had plenty of money about him, and cared not one fig for the expected halfpence—was ready to burst with impatience: but he dared not even for an instant do aught that might create a suspicion. The old dame drew out a small packet of halfpence wrapped in a piece of paper; and as she deliberately opened this paper, the Burker's eye caught sight of the name of Smedley amongst the printed contents thereof. Then he beheld his own name; and the words "the mercy of the Crown" likewise met his view.

"Here, my poor old man—here's thrippence for you," said the dame; "and I'm sure I hope the money will do you as much good as if you was a Christian."

"Please to leave it wrapped up in the paper, ma'am," said the Burker: "it's rayther more convenient to carry."

"Well, so it be," said the dame, who was disposed to be particularly loquacious. "I got the change just now in paying my weekly bill at the baker's. And what do you think? While I was a-standing quite promiscuous-like a-talking at the counter, in comes a policeman and pitches a packet of handbills; and he says, says he, 'I say, Mr. Oatcake, just distribute these amung your customers—more partikler amung them as brings bakin's, because it's the poorer orders.'"

"To be sure ma'am!" said the Burker, growing desperately impatient. "Beg your pardon—but I've got a little appintment with our Rabbi at the sinnigog——"

"Oh! I won't detain you, my good man," continued the dame. "I was only going to say that when the policeman left the shop, Mr. Oatcake says, says he, 'These bills come in precious handy to wrap up halfpence.'"

"No doubt of it, ma'am!"—and the Burker, now unable to restrain his impatience any longer, snatched the handbill from her grasp and burst away from her.

"Well, I never did see a poor old Jew like that take such long strides before!" said the dame to herself, as she stood for some moments looking after the Burker. "But poor man! he's no doubt very particular in saying his prayers reglar, and is pretty nigh as good as a Christian after all."

Meanwhile the Burker was pursuing his way; and with the little handbill laid upon his tray, was reading its contents.

"Here's a pretty go!" he said to himself. "If the Government is a man of any feelin', he ought to be ashamed of hisself to try and bribe a fellow to turn round upon his pals."

At the same time it was with no very pleasurable sensations that Mr. Barnes perused the handbill: for he saw thereby that the authorities were terribly earnest in their pursuit of him. Moreover, his thoughts speedily riveted themselves upon Jack Smedley; and he said to himself, "It's high time I should hook it! The appintment with the Duke can't werry well be kept. I must show London a clean pair of heels afore I'm an hour older."

But at this moment he felt a tap upon his shoulder; and turning round with a start that made his unsold pastilles dance upon the tray, he beheld Jonathan Carnabie again. The Burker could scarcely restrain himself from knocking the old man down and then taking to his heels: but a glance towards the end of the street showed him that several persons were passing, and he dared not thus rashly thrust his head into the lion's mouth. It struck him that there was something singular in the old sexton's look; and then too,

this third visit naturally filled the Burker's guilty mind with misgivings.

"I want a few more pastilles," said Jonathan: "they seem so good—and you are such a worthy man——"

"Cuss his eyes!" growled the Burker, who had the greatest difficulty in containing himself.

"What did you say?" asked Carnabie, looking up into the pretended Jew's countenance: and now—being already prepared to view him with suspicion, from all that Jack Smedley had said—Jonathan was at once struck with the peculiar expression of the Burker's eyes: so that he could not prevent himself from starting as the idea of the villain's identity flashed to his mind.

At that very instant a couple of policemen burst round the corner of a diverging street which was close by; and the Burker was seized upon at the moment that he beheld his recognition on the part of the old sexton.

"At last we have got you!" exclaimed one of the constables, with his staff in readiness to knock the miscreant down if he attempted resistance.

Barney struggled desperately,—giving vent at the same time to terrible imprecations: but the very gaberdine which served as his disguise encumbered him now—and he was quickly overpowered. It was some minutes before Jonathan Carnabie could recover from his astonishment at having thus learnt that beneath the garb of a venerable Jew was concealed the individual who had sought his life at Woodbridge, and who had so recently imposed upon him with such success in London. A cab was speedily called: the Burker was placed in it, and at once conveyed to Bow Street,—old Jonathan Carnabie following to listen to the proceedings, and to give his evidence, if needful.

We should observe that Jack Smedley, immediately after separating from the old sexton, had observed a policeman come sauntering round the corner of the street where he was posted; and he sped to accost him.

"Hasten!" said Jack: "there—in that direction—and arrest the old Jew. He is Barney the Burker!"

"The Burker!" ejaculated the constable. "Here's a capture! But I can't tackle him alone: he's the most desperate villain in all England. Will you come and help?"

"No—not I!" answered Jack, shrinking in horror from the idea of daring the deadly vengeance of his accomplice in the first moment of the desperado's fury at finding that he was betrayed.

"Well, where is he?" demanded the constable.

"Near the end of that street," was Jack Smedley's impatient answer.

"Then I'll nab him!" quickly rejoined the constable: "there's another officer close by!"

With these words the policeman turned upon his heel, and hastened into the street which ran parallel with that where the Burker was:—and procuring the assistance of a brother-official whom he encountered at a short distance, he and his comrade sped along a narrow street connecting the two above-mentioned. The capture was effected in the manner already described: and Smedley beheld it from under a gateway leading into a mews. He saw the cab arrive to bear Barney off to Bow Street; and thither Jack Smedley hastened on foot, in order to turn approver on behalf of the Government, that he might thereby save his own life.

Though it was now late in the afternoon, the magistrate was still sitting at Bow Street; and the Burker, dressed in his Jewish apparel, was placed in the dock. The news speedily spread throughout the neighbourhood that the formidable Barney was taken: and the court was in a very short time crowded to excess. One of the constables who had captured the criminal, deposed to the effect that he had been accosted by a stranger who gave him the information upon which he had acted. The Superintendent of Police for that district then called the magistrate's attention to the fact that the prisoner had escaped from Liverpool gaol, to which he had been some time back committed on a charge of murder; and the officer produced the placard published on the occasion, specifying the particulars of that escape and offering a reward for his re-apprehension.

"There are likewise, your worship," added the Superintendent, "grave and serious charges against this man arising out of certain discoveries made at a house in Lambeth, and which your worship doubtless bears in mind."

"It does not appear to me necessary to go into that matter," said the magistrate: "the course to be pursued in the present instance is clear enough. All that I have to do is to satisfy myself of the identity of the prisoner now in the dock with the one who escaped from the gaol at Liverpool; and to order his transfer to that town, that he may duly take his trial at the next Assizes holden for the Northern Circuit. What evidence, Mr. Superintendent, have you to establish this identity?"

"If the prisoner, your worship, was stripped of his disguise," responded the official thus addressed, "there are no doubt plenty of persons here who could identify him."

"Please your worship," said one of the constables who had captured the Burker, "I wanted to take off all that hair from his face: but he says it is stuck on so tight that it can only be removed by hot water—and there was not time——"

"You had better remove the prisoner for a few minutes," interrupted the magistrate, "and let the false hair be taken off."

"Please your worship," exclaimed a man who had just entered the court, and was now making his way through the crowd, "I can identify him as he is!—it was I who gave the information that caused his arrest!"

All eyes were turned upon the speaker: but it was not necessary for Barney to look at his countenance to see who he was: he had already recognised the voice—and a low but savage imprecation fell from his lips as he found that he was after all betrayed by Jack Smedley. The miscreant clenched his fist and ground his teeth with the deep concentrated rage that filled his soul: but he was impotent for purposes of mischief: otherwise he would have flown like a tiger at Smedley, to throttle or to tear him to pieces. There he was, however, powerless, and under complete restraint—shut up in the dock—manacles upon his wrists—a policeman on his right hand—a policeman on

his left—and numerous other constables close by to seize upon him at the least demonstration of violence.

Jack Smedley ascended the witness-box; and having been sworn, he at once addressed the magistrate with a hasty and excited volubility.

"Please your worship, that man is Barney the Burker—and I can prove it! My name is John Smedley; and I claim the benefit of the promise held out in this hand-bill. I was the means of handing over the Burker to the constables; and I have now come to give myself into custody."

The announcement of Jack Smedley's name produced a considerable sensation in the court; for every one recognised it as that of the master of the house in Lambeth the hideous revelations of which had created so great an excitement throughout the metropolis.

"Don't believe a word, your worship, that is told you agin me," said the Burker, in a sort of half-dogged, half-submissive tone. "I'm a poor, honest Jew which gets his livin' in a respectable manner: and I can bring fifty witnesses to prove it. As for that there constable, I never said nothink of the sort about not being able to take off my beard without hot water. It's a nat'ral beard, your worship—and as fast on to my chin as your worship's whiskers is to your cheeks. And as for Jack Smedley, everybody knows he is a white-livered, sneakin' scoundrel——"

"It is rather singular," interjected the magistrate, "that if you are a respectable Jew you should have any such particular knowledge of the man Smedley. But we will soon ascertain whether your beard is false or not——"

"Now that I look close, I can see plain enough it is a false one, your worship," said the constable on the Burker's right hand: "and the moustachios too."

"I can identify him, your worship!" exclaimed another voice from amidst the crowd: and old Jonathan Carnabie now stepped into the witness-box.

His evidence was to the effect that he was sexton of the parish church of Woodbridge in Westmoreland—that he had engaged the Burker as an assistant, not knowing who he was at the time—that the fellow had intended to rob and murder him—but that his criminal design had been frustrated by the sudden arrival of assistance. Jonathan further stated that he had been hocussed and robbed by the Burker in London; and he excited some merriment in the Court by describing how he had purchased pastilles of the false Jew without for an instant suspecting that his old acquaintance the Burker was concealed beneath that disguise.

"Well, I tell you what, then," said Barney, who now began to think that it were better after all if he were to be transferred to Liverpool, inasmuch as the journey thither might possibly offer some facilities of escape; "I'm a considerate man in my way—and don't see the use of botherin' the justice. So I'll just admit for form's sake that I am the genelman which they say I be—Mr. Barnes, to wit. So there's an end of the matter."

"In that case," observed the magistrate, "I have nothing more to do than to direct that you, Mr. Superintendent, will take the necessary measures for conveying the prisoner to Liverpool. The clerk will make out the depositions of what has taken place, and you may start with your prisoner as soon as you think fit."

The Burker was now removed from the dock; and as the cells attached to the Court itself were considered to be stronger and more secure than those belonging to the station-house on the opposite side of Bow Street, the prisoner was consigned to one of the former. Jack Smedley was then placed in the dock; and on his own confession was committed to take his trial for the murder of an elderly person who passed by the name of Smith, and who was lodging at his house in Lambeth some time back. But he was given to understand by the magistrate that the promise held out by the Secretary of State would no doubt be fulfilled towards him. All these proceedings occupied the magistrate until nearly eight o'clock in the evening: so that the clerk of the court had no leisure to commence the depositions in the Burker's case until those in Jack Smedley's had been completed in order that the latter might be transferred to Horsemonger Lane Gaol.

CHAPTER CXV.

THE CELL.

It happened that at the time Barney the Burker was standing at the dock at Bow Street, the Duke of Marchmont was visiting Covent Garden Market, in order to purchase a handsome present of fruits and flowers as a present for Mrs. Oxenden, whom it was vitally important that he should conciliate by every means which suggested themselves—either by substantial bounties or by agreeable little attentions. While he was engaged in making those purchases, the rumour reached his ears that the notorious Burker had been arrested in a Jewish garb, and was then under examination at Bow Street. For an instant a cold terror seized upon the Duke of Marchmont: but the next moment he reflected that the prisoner would not scarcely for his own sake—and at least not in this early stage of the proceedings—confess to other crimes than that with which he was charged: for the same person who mentioned in the fruiterer's shop the circumstance of the Burker's capture, added that the magistrate was merely seeking to establish his identity in order to tranfer him to Liverpool.

The Duke, having paid for his purchases, and intimated to what address they were to be sent, issued from the market. He dismissed his carriage, which was waiting for him; and wandered for some little while about the adjacent streets, reflecting upon the course which it were expedient for him to pursue: for he felt how necessary it was that he should render the villain some kind of assistance if possible. At length his mind was made up; and he looked about him for a shop where articles of ironmongery were sold. He speedily found one; and entering it, made a variety of purchases, amounting to the value of several pounds. He ordered them to be sent to his mansion in Belgrave Square,—at the same time depositing his card upon the counter to indicate who he was. But while the shopman, having made many obsequious bows on reading the name

upon the card, was making out the receipt, the Duke abstracted a file from the counter and concealed it in his pocket. As a matter of course this theft was not perpetrated for the miserable purpose of evading the payment of a few pence for the file: the large purchases which the Duke had made were merely a pretext for his visit to that shop—but it did not suit his purpose to include a file amongst those purchases. He therefore stealthily helped himself to one.

Issuing from the shop, the Duke returned into Covent Garden Market, in order to pick up whatsoever fresh information he could in respect to the proceedings at Bow Street; and he now learnt that the Barker, having admitted his name and identity, was under order of removal with the least possible delay to Liverpool. The Duke however found that another case—namely, that of Jack Smedley—was occupying the magistrate's attention, and that great crowds were collected in the court and in the street. He accordingly loitered about the neighbourhood until this case was terminated and the crowds had dispersed: he then repaired to the Bow Street police-office and inquired for the magistrate. But his worship had just taken his departure; and the Duke was referred to the Inspector.

On being conducted into the Inspector's room, the Duke of Marchmont gave his card, and at once experienced the most cringing civility.

"Being in Covent Garden Market," said his Grace, assuming a careless off-hand manner, "I happened to hear that a notorious criminal disguised as a Jew had been this afternoon arrested in a particular street at the West End of the town. Now, I have a strong reason for wishing to have a sight of this individual, if it be not in contravention of your rules or regulations."

"Certainly, my lord," answered the Inspector with a low bow; "you shall see the man. But might I ask——"

"Oh, yes! there is no secret in the matter," responded the Duke with a smile. "I was about to explain myself. The fact is——But, Ah! doubtless, now I bethink me, the prisoner's person was searched?"

"To be sure, my lord," replied the Inspector.

"Then you can tell me whether a diamond ring," continued the Duke, "was found about him—a ring set with a single diamond——"

"No, my lord," answered the Inspector. "A very considerable sum of money in notes and gold was found upon the prisoner—but nothing else of any value. May I ask why your Grace——"

"To be sure!" ejaculated the Duke, with an air of most condescending frankness: "a few words will suffice to explain the matter. I happened to be passing this afternoon through the very identical street where the pretended Jew was subsequently arrested; and believing him to be really what he seemed, I stopped to give him alms. For this purpose I took out my purse; and in so doing, drew off my glove. I bestowed some small coin upon him—and continued my way. Scarcely had I reached the end of the street, when I missed a diamond ring from my finger. I felt tolerably certain I must have unconsciously drawn it off along with my glove——"

"No doubt of it, my lord," observed the Inspector.

"I hastened back to the spot, where I found the seeming Jew still standing; and I asked him if he had observed a diamond ring lying in the street after I had left him? He answered in the negative: but it struck me at the time there was some confusion in the fellow's manner——"

"No doubt of it, my lord!" said the Inspector: "your Grace may depend upon it that the scoundrel found the ring."

"That is what I have come to ascertain," said the Duke. "But if it were not discovered upon his person——"

"Nevertheless, my lord, he has got it," interrupted the Inspector: "rest assured he has got it!"

"Got it!" said the Duke, affecting a bewildered air.

"To be sure, my lord!" rejoined the official. "Of course your Grace is ignorant of the tricks these scoundrels are up to: but there can be no doubt that he swallowed the ring."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Marchmont, now putting on a look of immense astonishment.

"Or else, perhaps," added the Inspector, "it is just possible that he may have so cleverly concealed it in some part of his dress, that it escaped the notice of the constable who searched him."

"As he is now in a position in which the ring can be of no possible use to him," continued the Duke, "he may perhaps be inclined to give it up to me—supposing your latter suggestion to be the true one, and that he has it concealed about his person. It is not for the value of the ring in a pecuniary sense—but it was given to me by a deceased relative——"

"I will go and speak to the prisoner, my lord," exclaimed the Inspector.

"Thank you—I shall feel grateful," said the Duke: and he suffered the Inspector to get as far as the door, ere he exclaimed, "But when I think of it, the villain is much less likely to acknowledge the fact to you than he is to me. Persons of his class invariably regard the functionaries of the law in the light of enemies whom they have a right to baffle and set at defiance to the utmost of their power."

"True, my lord," said the Inspector: "this is unfortunately too much the case."

"Well then, my lord," continued the Duke, "if I were to see the fellow, he might perhaps do for me that which he would not do for you."

"If your Grace has no objection to step across the street to the cell where he is confined: for I regret that I have not the power to order him to be brought here into your Grace's presence."

"Neither would I have you do such a thing," exclaimed the Duke. "I will accompany you."

The Inspector bowed; and Marchmont went with him across the street to the police-office. Procuring the keys from the gaoler—and taking a lantern, or bull's-eye, in his hand—the Inspector conducted the Duke of Marchmont to the back part of the premises, where a low door admitted them into a narrow little yard — or rather uncovered passage—whence the cells opened.

"Will your Grace speak to him through the wicket?" asked the Inspector in a whisper: "or will your lordship enter the cell?"

"Oh, with your permission I will enter it," replied the Duke: "for then he may possibly recognise me as having given him alms to-day."

"I am afraid, my lord," whispered the Inspector, "that if your Grace expects any display of gratitude on that account, you will be disappointed: for he is one of the most diabolical scoundrels as yet unhung."

"We can but try," responded Marchmont. "I suppose he is chained?"

"He is only manacled, my lord: he has got handcuffs upon him; and these we consider sufficient to ensure his safe custody—especially when your Grace is informed that the cells are of considerable strength."

Having thus spoken, the Inspector unlocked the door of the cell; and as he flung the light of the bull's-eye inside, the Burker was discovered sitting upon the wooden bench and reclining back in the angle of the walls. He still retained his disguise—with the exception of the wig, which had been taken off before he stood in the dock in the police-court: but the long grey beard and moustache continued affixed to the lower part of his countenance.

"Well, I say," growled the Burker, not immediately recognising the Duke of Marchmont, "are any of you chaps coming to bring me some hot water to get off this cursed beard? I know as how my face isn't a werry 'ansome one: but that's no reason why I should have to peel off all the skin and leave my chin as raw as a bit of bullock's liver."

"I will see that you have water presently," said the Inspector: "it has no doubt been forgotten in the hurry of businsss. Here's a gentleman who wishes to speak to you."

"A genelman?" exclaimed the Burker. "Who the devil——"

"Lend me the lantern, Mr. Inspector, if you please," said the Duke, purposely speaking deliberately so that his voice might be recognised by the Burker,—who, his Grace knew full well, would

be shrewd and cautious enough not to show any inconvenient sign of recognition.

Marchmont entered the cell with the bull's-eye; and for a moment holding it so that its light fell upon his own features, he darted upon the Burker a look which enjoined prudence and caution: so that Barney, at once taking the hint, and inwardly rejoiced at the presence of his Grace, considered that the best thing he could do was to remain silent and take his cue from the nobleman.

"Do you not recollect," continued Marchmont, "that I stopped and gave you a shilling to-day, when you were standing in the street?"

"Well, I think I do," replied the Burker.

"And you remember that I returned," continued his Grace, "and asked you something about a ring?"

"Well, I do recollect summut of that also," was the prisoner's response.

"And you deny having seen that ring which I dropped?"

"To be sure: cause why I didn't see it."

"I know you said so at the time," continued the Duke of Marchmont: "but I had my doubts then—and I have them still more strongly now. Come, my man, confess the truth. That ring is of no use to you——"

"Not a bit," replied the Burker.

"But it is much valued by me," proceeded Marchmont, "because it was a gift from a relative who is now no more. Situated as you are, unhappy man——"

"Yes—a devilish pretty sitiwation it is," said the Burker. "Nice easy seat, this—pleasant airy cell—no smell of the drains—plenty of good grub—a bottle of the best wine—and a set of say-nothink-to-nobody kind of fellows that doesn't take you by the scruff of the neck and shove you along when they wants you to move from place to place."

"Come, none of your nonsense, now!" exclaimed the Inspector sharply, as he stood just behind the Duke.

"Oh! that's you, Mr. Jack-in-office—is it?" said the Burker.

"Pray do not irritate him," whispered the Duke hastily to the official. "I am sure he has got my ring; and I think I can do something with him:"—then again turning to the Burker, Marchmont said, "Come, my man, it will do you no good to deny the fact."

"Well, I'll tell you what it is," interrupted Barney, who was at no loss to conjecture that the Duke wanted to speak to him alone: "if so be as I've got summut to tell, I shan't tell it in the presence of that Jack-in-office. He's insulted me—he's wounded my feelin's in their most sensitive pint——"

"Mr. Inspector," whispered the Duke, now again hastily turning towards the official, "may I venture to beg that you will just step away from the threshold of the door?"

"To be sure, my lord," responded the officer, who was all obsequiousness. "I do really believe your Grace will manage the fellow yet; but if not, I will have his person searched once more."

"Meanwhile let me try what I can do," whispered Marchmont.

The Inspector instantaneously quitted the threshold of the open door, and began pacing to and fro in the little yard, purposely making his boots stamp heavily on the pavement, so as to convince the Burker that he was no longer listening.

"Come now, my good man," said the Duke, thus speaking in order to keep up appearances in case the Inspector should overhear what was passing, "you may as well give me up that ring; and if money is now of any service to you, I shall cheerfully pay for the restoration of a jewel on which I set so much value."

While thus speaking, the Duke of Marchmont produced the file—choosing a moment when the Inspector's footsteps sounded from the extremity of the little yard; and at the same time his Grace bent a significant look upon the Burker. The prisoner clutched that file—nodded knowingly—and thrust it into his waistcoat-pocket.

"Perhaps they will soon search you again?" hastily whispered the Duke: and then he at once exclaimed aloud, "This denial is ridiculous! I know you *must* have my ring."

"Of course he has," muttered the Inspector, who caught those words while turning round close by the door.

"No—they won't search me again," was the quick whisper which now came from the Burker's lips.

"I tell you that it is useless to persist in this denial," exclaimed the Duke: then taking a diamond ring from his pocket, he added in a low under-tone, "Give it up to me in a few minutes."

"I tell you I haven't got it!" vociferated the Burker as he received the ring and nodded significantly.

"But all appearances are against you, my man," rejoined the Duke: then again lowering his voice, he hastily added, "If you succeed in escaping, write to me—and I will send you more money:"—at the same time he thrust some compactly crushed up bank-notes into the miscreant's hand.

There was a further semblance of accusation and remonstrance on the part of the Duke, as well as of sturdy denial on that of the Burker,—until at length the nobleman, as if yielding to a fit of angry impatience, ejaculated, "It is no use, Mr. Inspector: I can do no good with this fellow."

"I was afraid not, my lord," observed the officer, now returning to the threshold of the door. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, to treat his lordship in this manner."

"His lordship?" ejaculated the Burker: "how did I know he was a lord? You said fust of all he was a genelman."

"It is no less a personage than his Grace the Duke of Marchmont," replied the Inspector ostentatiously.

"Well—a duke may do a poor devil some good," said the Burker: "so here goes! Just put your fingers, my lord, inside my veskit—right underneath this cussed old gaberdine; and there you'll find a slit in the linin'."

The Duke, handing the bull's-eye to the Inspector, advanced towards the prisoner, and affected to be fumbling amongst his garments in search of the place of concealment which had been described. But it was in reality from the waistcoat-pocket that he took the ring; and turning towards the Inspector, the nobleman displayed it with a look of joyous satisfaction.

"I congratulate your lordship," said the official, who was himself highly delighted with what he conceived to be the successful result of a proceeding at which he had materially assisted.

"Much as I am horrified at this man's character and crimes," said the Duke, "yet if there be any way in which I can temporarily ameliorate his condition while he is in this place——"

"There is nothing, my lord, which you can do in that respect," answered the Inspector. "He will be removed by the earliest mail-train to-morrow morning to Liverpool; and in this cell must he remain until the hour of departure."

"Well then, there is nothing I can do for him," observed the Duke: then turning to the Burker, he added, "Unhappy man, I hope you will repent of what you have done!"

Having thus expressed himself with a monstrous hypocrisy and dissimulation, the Duke of Marchmont issued from the cell.

"You shall have hot water almost immediately," said the Inspector, pausing for an instant ere he locked the door.

"Thank'ee," answered the Burker: "but it's too late now. I'd much rayther be left to go to sleep quietly, if so be I'm to start off so thundering early in the morning."

"But you require food before you go to sleep," said the Inspector.

"Not a mouthful—and not a drain," rejoined the prisoner gruffly. "Do you think a feller has got any stomach for grub when he is in such a precious plight as this? I wish you'd leave me to myself—undisturbed—to sleep away my bad thoughts: and then I shall thank you."

"Very well," answered the Inspector: "you shall not be disturbed:"—and he then locked the huge door of the cell.

As the Duke and the official issued forth into the street again, the latter said in a servile manner, "See, my lord, what it is to have a great title. If I hadn't happened to have told that fellow who your lordship is, he never would have given up the ring."

"And as I am indebted to you for so much civility and attention," responded Marchmont, "you must not feel it an insult if I proffer you some little token of my gratitude."

At the same time his lordship thrust a ten-pound note into the Inspector's hand: and then hurried away, as if for the purpose of cutting short the thanks which the recipient of this bounty began to proffer.

But let us return to the Burker. Scarcely had the door of the cell again closed upon him, when he gave a sort of bound upon his seat, as if to afford ebullition to his hitherto pent-up feelings of delight. Not only had he now in his possession a little instrument by the aid of which much might be done, and the important deed of an escape perhaps be effected: but he had likewise the assurance that the Duke of Marchmont was not abandoning him to his fate, but that he was interesting himself in him.

"So," said the Burker, thus continuing the train of his ideas, "if the worst comes to the worst and I don't get out of limbo now, but find myself cast for death at Liverpool, there's a nobby cove as will stand my friend; and I shouldn't wonder if he was to bring the case of Mr. Barnes Esquire afore the House of Lords, and say as how it would be a thundering shame to put so useful a genelman out of the way by making his neck acquainted with a thing that's only fit for a hoss or a hass—a halter to wit. Ah! it's a blessed good thing to have a Duke as one's pal: for somehow or another he's sure to get me safe out of this precious mess that I'm in. And if so be I do come off scot free, I'll hunt out that sneaking, snivelling rascal, Jack Smedley; and I'll have his life as sure as his name's what it is. Perhaps I shall go across the water at the country's expense—just as our great ambassadors travels for nothing—or as them dirty scamps of German Princes does when they comes over to visit their pals at Vindsor Castle or Buckingham Palace. And if I do go out in that there honourable manner to Wan Diemen's Land or Australia, so much the better for my resolve to wring that feller Jack Smedley's neck: cos why, he's certain to be lagged. And if I'm let free altogether through my friend the Duke—or if so be I escape to-night—blowed if I don't start off at my own expense—that is, at the Duke's—but it's just the same thing: and I'll never rest till I cook Jack Smedley's goose."

The Burker sometimes had a habit of musing as well as of talking in a strain that was horribly and ferociously humourous: and such was the mood that he found himself in now. A pitchy darkness prevailed in the cell: but if any eyes had been peering in upon that wretch, and if they could have penetrated the Cimmerian blackness of the place, it would have been seen that his countenance expressed a diabolic savageness while he was thus meditating his schemes of vengeance in respect to Jack Smedley.

The Burker felt the file; and by the touch he knew that it was one well suited to his purpose. He was tolerably well assured that he would not at least for the present be intruded upon, inasmuch as he reflected that whatsoever the Inspector had promised in the presence of the Duke of Marchmont, he was certain to perform. The reader can have been at no loss to comprehend the Burker's motive in declining to have hot water sent in wherewith to take off his beard, and likewise in refusing the refreshments which the Inspector had proffered. He wished to be left entirely to himself, so that with the least possible delay he might commence operations towards the achievement of his escape. It was really true, as he had stated to the constable, that he could not take off his false beard without the use of hot water: for the adhesive matter clung tight to the skin, which it would assuredly peel off if it were attempted to remove the beard by violence. And then, too, it must be observed that the Burker had not been shaven for two or three days; so that the false beard had a particularly powerful hold on the natural stubbly growth over all the lower part of his face.

Not many minutes elapsed after the Duke of Marchmont and the Inspector had quitted the cell, before the prisoner—now convinced that everything was again quiet—began to file away at one of the handcuffs. The operation of severing the iron was not a very long one, although he had to work somewhat at a disadvantage from the fact that his two hands were kept by the connecting chain inconveniently close together. But when one ring was thus sundered, and that hand was free, the other

manacle was more expeditiously eaten through with the biting teeth of the file. Scarcely was this task accomplished, and just as the Burker was beginning to rub in gleefulness the hands that were thus liberated,—when he heard the door of the little yard open.

To slip his hands through the rings again—to conceal the file—to stretch himself upon the bench—and to begin to breathe with a heavy regularity as well as with a certain nasal sound,—all these were the work of a moment. But still the Burker was seized with dire alarm, lest any official should enter the dungeon to examine whether his handcuffs were all right. He heard heavy footsteps approaching: they stopped at the door of his cell; and then the trap was pushed open. The light of a bull's-eye was thrown through that trap into the cell; and it streamed full upon Barney's countenance. He affected to wake up slowly; and rubbing his eyes, growled forth, "What the devil did you do that for?—why can't you let a feller sleep?"

"I only wanted to see that you were all right," answered the constable, who was peeping through the trap.

"All right indeed!" responded the Burker, still in a growling tone. "I raythor think that I'm all wrong; and so you'd fancy too, my fine feller, if you was locked up in this cussed place. Why, it took me half-an-hour to compose myself to sleep on this hard plank; and now you've woke me up, it'll take me another blessed half-hour to go off again."

"I didn't mean to disturb you," answered the officer; "and that's the reason that I looked through the trap instead of opening the door."

"Well, you're a considerate genelman in your way," rejoined Barney, "but I don't think as how the tax-payers of this blessed country gives you chaps twenty bob a week a-piece to come waking up respectable people which is taking their natural rest. Howsomever, I forgive you for one: and so now good night."

Having thus spoken, the Burker turned round upon the hard bench again, and affected to be endeavouring to compose himself off to sleep. The constable closed the little trap-door; and immediately afterwards the Burker caught the sound of the yard-door shutting likewise. He started up from the bench; and off came the manacles again. His proceedings—at least the next proceeding which he had to adopt, was already settled in his mind. He knew these cells of old; and he was well acquainted with the features, the arrangements, and the position of all the adjacent buildings. There was no upper storey to the little structure containing the cells; the roof was immediately above his head; and in that quarter it was that he purposed—or at least hoped to be enabled to effect his egress.

The cell was tolerably high; and there was no moveable furniture in it which he could use to raise himself upon, or to make available as a standing-place. But in this respect his plan of proceeding was also settled: he had well weighed and pondered the point when filing at his handcuffs. In the first place, by the aid of the file he dislodged a brick in the wall at the height which suited his purpose and at about two feet distant from the corner or angle. Then he did the same with another brick in a corresponding position in the wall which united with the other one to form that angle. Working in the dark, these processes were far longer than they would have been if he had the benefit of light. His next step was to break off a portion of the wood which edged the hard plank-bed, or rather seat, on which he had reposed himself when the constable looked through the trap-door. He had so well calculated the length of the piece of wood which he could thus detach, in reference to the distance between the two holes left in the walls by the extraction of the bricks, that the stout fragment of timber exactly fitted into the apertures provided for its reception. The reader will therefore understand that this piece of wood formed the basis of a triangle of which the two walls were the sides and the angle of the wall was the apex: or, in more simple terms, the wood was a sort of hollow shelf stretching from wall to wall, at about two feet from the corner.

Standing upon this piece of wood, the Burker was enabled to commence operations upon that part of the roof which was immediately over his head; and aided by the file, he speedily forced a hole through the lath and plaster. With his hand he could feel the tiles; and he had now to dislodge them in such a way that they should not slide down the sloping roof and fall into the road—a circumstance which might lead to the frustration of his entire project of escape. Therefore, after having raised the first tile with the utmost caution, he drew in each successive one through the opening thus formed, and deposited it upon the floor of his cell. Though he worked with all his characteristic energy, yet was he in a continued state of suspense; for another visit on the part of a constable to the little trap in the door would prove the ruin of everything. This visit was not however paid; and thus the Burker worked on unmolested.

At length the opening was large enough for him to begin passing himself through it; and first protruding his head, he looked carefully around to see whether the coast was clear. No one was in the little yard—no one was looking forth from any of the numerous windows which, at the backs of the adjacent houses, commanded a view of the scene. At a short distance was the rear of the vast structure of Covent Garden Theatre; and as the Burker knew that the establishment was shut up at the time, a thought struck him.

"If I could only get into that place," he said within himself, "maybe I should have a choice of dresses; and whether I made my appearance in the streets as Harlequin or Pantaloon, it would at all events be a change from this cussed old black gaberdine and grey beard."

Having satisfied himself that he was unobserved, the Burker issued completely through the aperture which he had formed in the roof of his cell; and he now seemed to breathe the air of freedom. Gathering up the folds of his long garment in such a way that it might not encumber him nor impede his progress, he crept along a wall, and climbed to the top of the somewhat higher building than that from which he had escaped. Another connecting wall brought him to another flat-roofed house; and here he came to a stand-still. The place where he thus found himself, abutted

against a much higher building, to reach the summit of which there was only one means visible—and this was to climb a slanting leaden pipe. To do this, or to retrace his way altogether to the roof of his cell and seek some other avenue of escape amidst the maze of buildings, —these were the alternatives between which he had to decide. With straining eyes he penetrated through the semi-obscurity which prevailed; and he thought he beheld sufficient to convince himself that the passage of the leaden pipe, however desperate the venture might be, was the course to be adopted.

The courage of the Burker has been before spoken of; and as his circumstances were desperate, this natural courage on his part was now enhanced to a degree which rendered him almost reckless. His resolve was therefore speedily taken. Again he gathered up the old Jewish gaberdine in such a way that it might not impede his progress; and then he entrusted himself to the slanting pipe, in the same spirit of venturesome desperation with which a ship-wrecked mariner clings to the plank which is the only barrier between himself and destruction. The reader will understand that this leaden pipe sloped up from the roof where the Burker had landed, to the roof of the higher house against which the former building abutted; and it thus ran diagonally as it were, or obliquely, along the back of that loftier structure. We may add that there was just a sufficient interval between the pipe and the brickwork to allow the adventurous fugitive to obtain a firm grasp upon it;—and now success depended upon two conditions—the first being whether he could maintain his balance, and the second whether the pipe itself would be strong enough to support him.

Firmly clutching the pipe with his hands, and cautiously using his lower limbs to sustain him in that perilous position, the Burker began crawling up the pipe: but there was a moment when his heart almost failed him as he looked down into the frightful abyss to which he would be hurled if his hands failed to retain their hold, or if the pipe itself should give way. But sternly compressing his lips, and bracing himself up with all his courage, the Burker pursued his path of danger, —suspended in mid-air, and looking like some colossal insect that was crawling up the back of the house. Several yards were accomplished,—when one of the dreaded chances against him appeared about to receive a horrible realization: for the pipe began to bend. So mortal a terror seized upon the Burker, notwithstanding the daring nature of his disposition, and notwithstanding the recklessness of his character, that for an instant he felt his hands relaxing from the tightness of their grasp: but then the next moment, quick as thought, they tightened upon the pipe with even a stronger tenacity than before—while his lower limbs grasped it convulsively.

But the pipe was bending! To retreat was impossible: there was no gliding nor sliding back from the position in which he had placed himself. On he must go at all risks and ventures:—on he must go though the next instant should see the pipe suddenly give way or break beneath him and plunge the wretch headlong into the abyss below. Fortune however seemed determined to favour him: the pipe bent, but did not break: hope grew stronger in his breast—and it was with a wild thrill of joy that he could at length say to himself he was safe. His right hand clutched the ledge of the parapet of the high building to which he had thus venturously and desperately clambered up: a few instants more, and he stood in safety on the flat roof of that building. Almost overcome by a sense of the danger from which he had escaped, and shuddering at the recollection of the hideous gulf which by means of a frail pipe he had thus bridged, the Burker threw himself flat upon his back on the leads to repose for a few instants ere he pursued his way. Precious though time were, yet the man could not help thus resting there for that brief space.

CHAPTER CXVI.

TWO FRIENDS.

A COUPLE of rooms on the second-floor of one of the houses on the same line with the Bow Street police-office, were inhabited by a middle-aged man of the name of Bealby. He was a short, thin, active, dapper-looking person,—with hair and whiskers that had once been of a vivid red, but which were now turning grey. He had very sharp, keen, piercing eyes; and the entire expression of his countenance indicated cunning and duplicity. He was dressed in a somewhat seedy suit of black; and his linen was not altogether of the cleanest.

The two rooms communicated with folding-doors, which stood open; and the place was most singularly crowded with articles which at the first glance might either be taken for an assemblage of archæological curiosities, or else for the contents of a property-room at a theatre. There were helmets, and shields, and weapons of all sorts—curious costumes—a Turkish turban surmounting the wooden framework on which a mandarin's robe was displayed—a Red Indian's tomahawk lying next to an old-fashioned English musket—and a whaling harpoon keeping company with a New Zealand bow and arrows. There were old pieces of china, statues, vases, and pictures—brickbats that were alleged to be part of a recently discovered Roman wall in some place or another—bowls and cups that were represented to have been dug out of Herculaneum and Pompeii—while a mummy in a glass case appeared to be staring with eyeless sockets at a gigantic skeleton which grinned at it from the opposite wall. There were strange pieces of theatrical scenery too, and which a small label represented to have been used at the Royal Opera some little while back established by the King of the Sandwich Islands in his Majesty's capital;—and, in a word, the contents of these two rooms were of the most miscellaneous and no doubt of a very curious description.

By the light of a solitary candle in the front apartment, Mr. Bealby was drinking gin-and-water with a friend. This friend was many years younger than himself: indeed he was not more than five or six and twenty: but he had a sickly dissipated look, as if he were much better acquainted with the alcoholic mixture which he was now imbibing than with regular and wholesome

meals. He was exceedingly shabby in his apparel; and by the state of his linen appeared to possess the confidence of his washerwoman to a much smaller degree than did even Mr. Bealby himself. This individual bore the surname of Limber; but amongst his friends and equals he was more familiarly known by the diminutive of his Christian name of Benjamin.

We should observe that Mr. Bealby had been out to pass the evening at a free-and-easy, where he had partaken of a chop and a baked potato—thereby, to use his own highly-expressive language, knocking dinner, tea, and supper, all into one. At this free-and-easy he had encountered Mr. Limber, who was an old acquaintance, but whom he had not seen for some few years. Remembering that he had a little credit at the public-house nearly facing his lodging in Bow Street, and that this credit was good to the extent of a bottle of gin and half-a-dozen cigars, Mr. Bealby invited his friend home to partake of those refreshments—observing "that as they had a great deal to say to each other, they might just as well quaff their blue-ruin and smoke their weeds at his rooms." Thither therefore they repaired from the free-and-easy: the gin and the cigars were procured from the public-house aforesaid; and it happened that just at the time the Burker was engaged in climbing up the pipe, Mr. Bealby and Mr. Limber were sitting down to enjoy themselves in the apartment of the former.

Mr. Limber was prepared by some little conversation during the walk from the free-and-easy, to find his friend's rooms crammed with strange objects; and therefore on entering these apartments, he was not so much astonished as he would have been if suddenly introduced thither without any previous information on the point. At the same time, being somewhat of a nervous temperament, Ben Limber liked the aspect of the mummy and the skeleton as little as possible; and he sate with his back towards those objects, while discussing the gin-and-water, the cigars, and things in general.

"Why, how long is it since you and I met, old fellow?" asked Bealby, when they had begun to make themselves comfortable.

"A matter of six or seven years," was the response. "I was just fresh upon town then——green—uncommon green!—but I've picked up a bit or two of experience since."

"You was a lawyer's clerk then," said Bealby.

"Yes: but I devilish soon cut the law," replied Ben Limber, "and went upon the stage. I starred it a bit in the provinces as Mr. Sidney Howard Fitzplantagenet: but I soon got tired of that sort of business—and have been knocking about the world in various ways—till, betwixt you and me and the post I'm pretty near knocked down altogether."

"Well, we must see if we can't knock you up again," responded Bealby. "It will be a devilish hard thing if two clever chaps like you and me, can't put our heads together and do something good. You talked of your experiences: but they are nothing like mine! Why, my history would make such a book as never before was read!"

"Well, what have you been doing since you and I last met?" inquired Ben Limber.

"You should rather ask what I have *not* been doing," rejoined the other. "I've dabbled in everything. Let me see—what was I when you saw me last?"

"You had just gone through the Insolvents' Court, you know," answered Ben Limber, with a laugh: "and you was in high feather."

"Ah, to be sure!" observed Mr. Bealby: "I was getting up an Insurance Company at that time. I'll tell you how it was. I was three months in the Queen's Bench before I went with flowing canvass through the Court; and in the Bench I met half-a-dozen capital fellows, who agreed to join with me in starting the Insurance Company. So we soon had everything ready cut and dried; and we gave ourselves our respective situations. I was to be Resident Manager, with a salary of four hundred a year: another was to be Actuary: two others were to be Auditors: another was to be Vice-Chairman of the Board; and a lushing blade of a fellow was to be surgeon. So the moment we all got out, we set to work and established the concern. Splendid offices—Capital, two hundred thousand pounds!"

"The deuce!" ejaculated Ben Limber with a start of astonishment. "Where did you find your capitalists?"

"In imagination," answered Mr. Bealby, with a knowing look. "We issued the shares: it was not at all difficult—nothing to do but to have so many slips of paper neatly printed. We gave two or three hundred a-piece to ourselves, and five hundred to Lord Brummagem, who on that condition became the Chairman of the Board of Directors. I can assure you the whole affair was most splendidly managed: and for twelve months it went on swimmingly."

"You don't mean to say that you really issued any policies?" observed Mr. Limber.

"I mean to say," replied Bealby, "that we issued four or five hundred policies during those twelve months. The grand secret was that our medical examiner took every life that offered itself, no matter whether the applicant might be in the last stage of consumption."

"But when any one died?" said Mr. Limber inquiringly.

"Fraud, my dear fellow—fraud!" responded Mr. Bealby: "that was our invariable answer. The Company had been imposed upon—the insurer had kept back certain facts: he had admitted that he spat blood and had a continuous hacking cough, but he had withheld the important fact that he experienced an incessant pain in his great toe. Bless you! deaths came tumbling in at a frightful rate, because we ensured everybody, and we gave a per centage to our agents on every policy they brought in, so that they were interested in getting as many as possible, without the slightest reference to the value of the lives. The game would have lasted well enough, had it not been that a cursed weekly newspaper began to attack us: the bombardment was continuous and irresistible: so we fell to pieces. There was an end of the Universal Assurance Company for all Christendom."

"And what did you do next?" inquired Mr. Limber.

"I advertised an income of four pounds a week for everybody who would send me five shillings' worth of postage stamps. That was my next dodge," added Mr. Bealby, as he complacently whiffed his cigar.

"I don't quite understand it," observed his friend dubiously.

"Quite intelligible, my dear fellow!" said Mr. Bealby. "I inserted an advertisement in a newspaper offering to instruct any one who sent me five shillings' worth of postage stamps, in the way of making three or four pounds a week. On receiving the stamps, I sent half-a-dozen practical receipts,—one for making cheap ginger-beer—another for soda-powders—a third for pomatum—a fourth for a dentifrice—a fifth for an anti-bilious pill—a sixth for a cosmetic—and so on. Now observe! The advertisement cost me seven-and-sixpence—it brought me twenty letters containing the stamps—that was five pounds: deduct the expenses for advertisement, the little printed slips of receipts, the stationary and postage for replies—and I had at least four pounds eight to put into my own pocket."

"That was a lucrative thing," observed Ben Limber. "Why did you give it up?"

"It gave me up," answered Bealby: "it wore itself out. A number of other fellows imitated the trick: they cheapened the thing—they only asked for a shilling's worth of stamps: and so it soon ceased to be worth while to carry on the business at all."

"Well, what did you do next?" inquired Limber.

"I opened a servants' bazaar," responded Bealby.

"But how the deuce did you make a connexion amongst servants?" exclaimed Limber.

"I never did make any. I charged half-a-crown for registering each name in my book; and, you see, it was all clear profit."

"Well, but those who paid, expected recommendations to places?"

"Yes—and they got them too. I copied the addresses of persons advertising in the morning papers for domestics; and that was the way I managed."

"But the thing could scarcely last," said Limber.

"No more it did," replied Bealby, with a smile: "or else I should be carrying it on now. I was rather too fond of some of the pretty servant-girls that came to pay their fees; and betwixt you and me, Ben, the concern was suddenly broken up by an unpleasant little incident which occurred."

"How so?" asked Limber.

"The fact is, I was had up before the magistrate on an accusation of trying to snatch a kiss from a certain pair of red lips: an investigation followed—the way in which the business was transacted was brought to light—and while passing a month at the House of Correction on account of the kissing affair, I had ample leisure to reflect on what should be the new dodge."

"And what did you do then?" asked Ben Limber.

"I came out of prison in such precious bad plight," responded Mr. Bealby, "that I was scarcely fit for anything except to make myself a victim."

"A victim!" ejaculated Ben. "A victim of what?"

"A victim of religious persecution," answered Mr. Bealby. "Don't you see, I was a tradesman from the north of England who had been distrained upon for Church-rates; and resisting the claim upon principle, was made a martyr to the cause. I had come up to London to get some Member to present a petition to Parliament on my behalf; but being reduced to distress, was obliged to apply to the sitting magistrate at one of the police-courts—taking very good care, however, not to address myself to the worshipful gentleman who had committed me in the kissing case. Well, my story was believed: I had ten shillings given me from the poor-box; and the next day the case was in all the papers. 'Respectable man'—'distressed and careworn appearance'—and all that sort of thing. It told admirably; and subscriptions poured in. 'A.B.C.' sent two pounds; 'A Lady' five pounds; 'the Earl of X' ten pounds; 'A Dissenter' one guinea; and so forth. An elderly Quaker ferreted me out and took me to his house. I received the first subscriptions from the magistrate: they still kept pouring in—but I never got any more; for his worship in the meantime had written to the north, and had learnt that my tale was a pure fabrication. The Quaker resented a little familiarity of which I was guilty towards his pretty demure-looking daughter, from whose lips I sought a kiss; and so, all things considered, I was compelled to beat a retreat into another neighbourhood."

"And what did you do then?" inquired Ben Limber.

"I could not immediately settle my mind to anything," answered Mr. Bealby; "and so the money slipped away before I was well-prepared with a scheme for making more. At last, driven by necessity, I took to penny-a-lining for a sporting newspaper. It was hard work enough: but I got a good insight into turf-matters—though I did not much relish the vocation. I was thinking of giving up the newspaper—when a vacancy for a Prophet suddenly occurred."

"A Prophet?" ejaculated Ben Limber, his eyes staring wide with astonishment.

"Yes—to be sure!" said his friend coolly—"a Prophet at a weekly salary of two guineas. You don't twig, I see. Well then, I mean a Prophet to predict the winning horses at all forthcoming races."

"Ah, I understand!" said Ben Limber. "But how long did you keep that situation?"

"Only six months," responded Mr. Bealby: "for the truth is that in no single instance did I ever predict accurately. Not that in this respect I was in any way worse than the Prophets on other newspapers—only the proprietor of the one to which I belonged was rather particular, and he thought that a prophet ought to predict right at least once out of twenty times. So he discharged me; and I was again thrown upon the world."

"And what did you do then," asked Ben Limber.

"I got up a Benefit Society," replied Mr. Bealby.

"A Benefit Society?" echoed his friend. "For whose benefit?"

"For my own," was the response. "It was ostensibly for the advantage of the working-classes—but in reality for mine. Every one who paid a few pence a week was to have fifteen shillings a week during illness—to be buried, when he died, with a good walking funeral, and his widow to

have a ten pound note to buy mourning for herself and the children. I was Secretary, and Treasurer, and Auditor, and Manager——I think I was the Committee too: but I know very well that I was the principal recipient of the Society's benefits. At last there was an exposure and an inquiry: I was summoned before the magistrate—but I had taken very good care not to have the society enrolled; and therefore his worship had no power of jurisdiction. The case was dismissed; and in order that the members should not fall into most unchristian feuds amongst themselves relative to the division of the remaining funds, I put them into my own pocket;—and bidding an eternal farewell to the ungrateful neighbourhood of Whitechapel where the exposure had taken place, I established my quarters in another."

"And what was the next course?" inquired Ben.

"I never was a fellow who could work much as long as there was any ready money to spend: and so I lived comfortably until I changed my last sovereign—when I began to think of something else. So I took to the Christmas hamper dodge."

"What do you mean?" asked Ben Limber.

"Why, out of the change for my last sovereign," replied Mr. Bealby, "I paid seven and-sixpence for an advertisement in the *Times*, which ran to the following effect:—'Bealby and Co., old established Wine-merchants, continue to despatch their famous Christmas hampers, but on reduced terms. To every person remitting one guinea, Bealby and Co. will forward a hamper containing one bottle of old port, one of rich brown sherry, one of old East India Madeira, one of French brandy, one of Jamaica rum, and one of prime Hollands.'—You would be astonished at the way in which the guineas came pouring in: so I kept up the advertisements during the Christmas week: then I renewed them for the New Year's week; and when that was over, I changed the name and address, and advertised splendid twelfth-cakes on similar terms. I reaped a golden harvest, and lived comfortably upon it for the next three months. At length one morning I sallied out, wondering what I should do next, with only eighteen-pence in my pocket——"

"And what did you do then?" inquired Ben Limber. "What could you possibly do with eighteen pence?"

"I went and took a theatre," was the cool reply.

"A theatre with eighteenpence!" exclaimed Limber. "Well, after all, my knowledge of the world is really nothing to your's!"

"I told you so just now," said Mr. Bealby. "Yes—it's a fact—I went and took a theatre at a rental of about a thousand a year."

"But what use could you turn it to?" asked his friend.

"Underlet it the very next day to some one else; and as he paid me the rent, but as I paid none myself, it was all clear profit as long as it lasted. But the proprietor sued me—I was put into prison, and had to petition the Insolvents' Court a second time."

"I should think you got remanded for that?" observed Ben Limber interrogatively.

"Nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Mr. Bealby. "I described myself as a Lessee—and that was sufficient. It is considered that every lessee or manager of a theatre may go through the Bankruptcy or Insolvents' Courts as often as ever they like; and they are always objects of sympathy. The Commissioner complimented me on not having had to insert the salaries of any performers in my schedule,—which was not however astonishing, as I had never employed any. However, I got off with flying colours—but with scarce a shilling in my pocket."

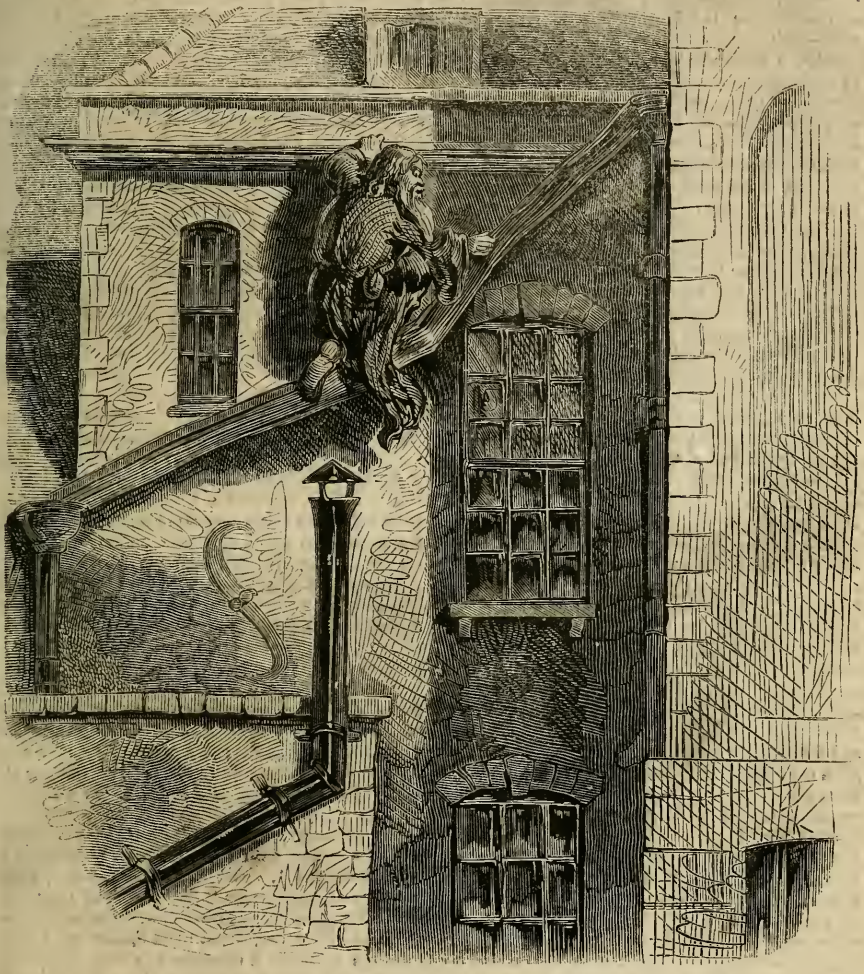
"And what did you do then?" inquired Mr. Benjamin Limber, who was evidently much interested in his friend's explanations.

"Why, just at that moment there was a grand festival going on in Paris: so I advertised that Mr. Bealby, the well known manager of excursion trips, offered to take a party over to Paris, paying the first-class railway fare thither and back—lodging and boarding them for a whole week at a first-rate hotel in the French capital—and supplying every luxury for breakfast, dinner, and supper,—all included for twenty guineas a head. Well, I contracted with the railway; and I had fifty subscribers to my party. We started:—this I was obliged to do, because according to agreement I was to collect the money at Dover. And you may be very sure that I *did* collect it there: but by some extraordinary mistake I took my place in a return-train immediately afterwards; and instead of going any farther on the way to France, I found myself supping again very quietly in London that same evening."

Mr. Benjamin Limber laughed uproariously at this last *escapade* of his friend Mr. Bealby, who himself joined in the mirth.

"And what did you do next?" inquired the younger gentleman.

"I found there was such a terrific exposure in the newspapers," was the reply,—"so many indignant letters were written—and so many unpleasant threats were promulgated about having me up before the Lord Mayor, that I deemed it expedient to take a trip into the country until the storm blew over. Unfortunately I got excessively drunk one night amongst a party of gentlemen somewhat sharper than myself; and when I awoke in the morning, I had not a single shilling left. There was a distressing position for a man of genius to be placed in! I went wandering about the country in a desperate state,—until one afternoon I reached an old deserted tile-kiln, with all the accompanying works in a dismantled and ruined condition. There I found an old man peering about in every nook and corner—digging up the earth—and apparently hunting for something. I watched him awhile from a distance,—thinking that he was a treasure-seeker. At length I accosted him. He was at the outset by no means inclined to be communicative: but as I had a presentiment that the encounter would tend to my advantage, I did my best to draw him into discourse. I learnt that he was a purveyor of curiosities for one of the old shops in Wardour Street, London—and that he was hunting for old earthen vessels in Warwickshire to save himself the trouble of going to Herculaneum or Pompeii in Italy. There was something in this pursuit which tickled my fancy. I offered to assist him; and I soon dug him out a lot of curious-shaped vessels and broken pipkins, which sent him into raptures. He paid me



liberally—gave me his address in London—and told me to call upon him. This interview gave a new impetus to my fertile fancy. I provided myself with all sorts of curiosities,—a piece of the true cross which a Cardinal had given me in Rome—a fragment of the holy coat which is preserved at Treves, and which fragment a monk whom I made tipsy had sacrilegiously torn off for my special gratification—the veritable cannon-ball which struck the spire of St. Stephen's at Vienna and knocked it on one side, when the Turks besieged that city—the bullet which slew Nelson at Trafalgar—the identical pen with which Napoleon signed the treaty of Amiens,—in short, I cannot enumerate the curiosities, ancient and modern, with which I provided myself while on my journey to London. Then, on arriving there, instead of calling on the old purveyor whom I had encountered at the tile-kiln, I went straight to the shop in Wardour Street, which he had happened to name to me; and I disposed of all my curiosities. But I was terribly disappointed at the pettiness of the price which I obtained for them. I really thought that I was playing an excellent game with the credulity of the curiosity-dealer,—until on grumbling at his terms, he gave me to understand it was the *ideas* he was paying for, and not the things themselves—for those he knew to be all humbugs. Then I laughed heartily—he laughed likewise—and the end of it all was he offered me a regular engagement. I remained with him for about six months, helping him with the ingenuity of my original ideas, and becoming initiated in many of the mysteries of his craft. He taught me, for instance, how to get up old pictures; and I learnt that he constantly employed six artists to paint him originals of Rubens, Vandyke, Titian, Greuze ——"

"Originals?" ejaculated Ben Limber.

"Why, of course!—weren't they to be sold *as*

originals?" demanded Mr. Bealby, somewhat indignantly. "And then too, my friend the curiosity-dealer taught me how to make mummies——"

"Make mummies?" cried Ben Limber, again in astonishment.

"Yes—to be sure!" exclaimed Mr. Bealby. "I myself got up a couple of mummies in so artistic a manner that a member of the Archæological Society proved in a neat and interesting speech of about six hours' duration, that they were at least four thousand years old; and there was not a dissentient from this opinion. You see that mummy there, in the glass case? I can assure you it was not in existence four months back; and this morning a gentleman belonging to that very Society, and who is considered to be one of its brightest ornaments—although he *is* deaf and half-blind—was thoroughly convinced that it is the oldest mummy ever brought into this country. He is to bring me twenty pounds for it to-morrow: but the worst of it, Ben," added Mr. Bealby, lowering his voice somewhat, "is that I owe fifteen pounds to my landlady; and she will take very good care to receive the money from the old archæologist, or else she won't let that blessed mummy go out of the place."

"How long did you stay with your curiosity dealer?" asked Ben Limber: "or perhaps I ought rather to have inquired why you left him?"

"Why, you see, the public curiosity is variable. To-day it's an old picture—to-morrow Tom Thumb: to-day some rubbish from Herculaneum — to-morrow the Bosjesmans. Well, just at that time the discovery of the Californian gold regions was making a tremendous sensation: so I had some thundering large pieces of granite carefully gilt, and I exhibited them as nuggets. They were in a glass case, and protected by a row of iron bars. I advertised that they were worth seventy thousand pounds; and all the town came to see them. At length one of the workmen who had helped to gild the granite, came to the exhibition one Monday morning; and as he was the worse for liquor to the extent of some three or four pots of beer, he let out the whole secret. I decamped—but with about eight hundred pounds in my pocket—the fruit of a fortnight's industry in displaying my nuggets. And would you believe it, Ben?—I fell a second time amongst thieves, and was plundered of my all!"

"Light come, light go," said Mr. Limber, laughing.

"Ah! it was no laughing matter for me," observed Mr. Bealby; "and I was obliged to take to something else. Some little speculation which I need not dwell upon——it was merely the exhibition of a sea-serpent, being three conger-eels curiously joined together——produced me fifty guineas; and then I resolved to turn curiosity-maker on my own account. I took these rooms: I applied myself assiduously to work—I invested my little capital—and now that I have got my stock-in-trade all in readiness, there comes a lull in the curiosity-market—things are flat—skeletons are below par—old armour is at a discount—there is no briskness in Roman brickbats—vessels from Herculaneum are dull—and nothing but that mummy appears to be looking up."

"As pleasant a series of adventures as ever one could wish to hear," said Ben Limber. "You are poor—and I am poorer still: you will have five pounds to-morrow for yourself out of the twenty—I have not got five pence, and no chance of getting them either."

"Never mind, my boy," said Mr. Bealby: "we shall be able to do something together. There's always a fine opening for men of enterprise and talent in this great metropolis. And I tell you what, Ben," added the archæological gentleman, in a tone of confidence—which was accompanied by a look rendered all the more mysterious by the influence of the alcoholic liquor,—"two chaps could work an oracle much better than one. I have often felt the want of a clever partner, or assistant. Lord bless you! if I had only possessed such an auxiliary as yourself, I should have invented and exhibited the perpetual motion long ago. But then where the devil was I to get a trustworthy fellow to turn the crank in the cellar?"

"True!" said Mr. Limber: "there are no doubt many things which two can do together, but which can't be accomplished by one."

"I have got hold of a capital idea," said Mr. Bealby: "but it wants a little cash to start it—some twenty or thirty pounds or so."

"Sell off the whole of this trumpery and raise the coin," suggested Mr. Limber.

"My dear fellow," responded his edifying friend Mr. Bealby, "you require to be enlightened on this point. These things are not worth eighteenpence, unless somebody takes a fancy to them. Look at their intrinsic value: it is nothing! Send them to an auction, or call in a lot of brokers—and to what ignominious nothingness do all my beautiful curiosities become reduced! A brickbat is then simply a brickbat: this corselet, which I declare to have been worn by Sir William Wallace at the battle of Falkirk, turns out to be a Horse-Guard's rusty breastplate, worth a few pence as old iron: that piece of pottery with the handle broken off, and with the letters T. I. scratched upon it—which I, speaking archæologically, pronounce to be an ancient Roman vessel of the time of the Emperor Tiberius—the initials standing for *Tiberius Imperator*,—that piece of pottery, I say, dwindles down in a moment to a base pipkin in which some urchin of modern times has confectioned hardbake or Everton toffie. So it is, my dear fellow, with the best part of these archæological marvels—with all the quaint dresses and curious costumes: or at all events auctioneers and brokers are such Goths and Vandals as to be utterly indifferent to the value with which antiquity stamps them. In a word, Ben, barring the mummy which is as good as sold, I don't think my whole collection, if sent to the hammer, would fetch ten shillings."

"Why not invite a number of your archæological friends to inspect the museum," asked Mr. Limber, "and tell them that you want to sell off in order to make a voyage round the world—or take a descent into Vesuvius—or to plunge into the Maelstrom to see what causes the whirlpool——"

"All this is ingenious enough Ben," interrupted Mr. Bealby: "and I honour you for the inventive genius you have just displayed. But the trick will not take. I told you just now that the curiosity market is as dull as ditch-water—skeletons are

stagnant—armour is heavy—and there is no use in trying to create a sensation on behalf of Roman pottery."

"Then how is the money to be raised?" demanded Ben Limber: "for if this new idea of your's is such a good one——But, I say, we have got to the bottom of the bottle! and there isn't a weed left!"

"My credit is good for a fresh supply of both," answered Mr. Bealby; "and as we are combining business with pleasure, we may as well keep up the discourse an hour or two longer. I will just run over the way——"

"I rather think I will accompany you," said Ben Limber, glancing somewhat shudderingly around towards the skeleton and the mummy. "I don't exactly like the companionship."

Mr. Bealby burst out laughing; and rising from his seat, he said, "Come along, Ben: I've got a latch-key, and we can let ourselves out and in."

"Holloa! what was that?" asked Ben Limber, turning somewhat pale as he glanced towards the door.

"I heard nothing," responded Bealby. "What did you fancy it to be?"

"Only some strange noise. I say, who lodges overhead?"

"The landlady and the servant," replied Bealby: "but they have been in bed a long time, and are by no means likely to listen. However we shall soon see."

Thus speaking, he opened the door, and paused for a few moments on the threshold: but all was still.

"Come along Ben," he said, in a whispering tone so as not to disturb the landlady. "We shan't be many minutes in obtaining a fresh supply; and then we can make a regular night of it."

The two friends accordingly stole gently down stairs: but at the same time footsteps were still more silently descending from the upper storey; and the Burker made his way into the museum of curiosities. He had penetrated through an unoccupied attic into the house; and he had been listening at the door to all the latter part of Mr. Bealby's discourse. It was his temporarily retreating footstep which had alarmed Ben Limber.

The Burker had heard sufficient to inspire him with the hope that the museum would furnish him with some disguise; and now that the coast was clear, he had taken the liberty of penetrating into Mr. Bealby's archæological sanctuary. Closing the door, he was advancing into the midst of the encumbering assemblage of goods,—when he was suddenly startled by the appearance of the colossal skeleton. Seized with dismay, the Burker sank down upon the seat which Mr. Bealby had recently occupied: but it was only for an instant that the Burker's consternation lasted. He was not the man to be long overpowered by such a spectacle; and starting up, he muttered to himself, "By jingo! I ought to be more afeard of the livin' than of the dead!"

He looked around him in search of some suitable disguise: but he was bewildered by the variety of the articles which met his view, and the confusion in which they were amassed pell-mell. He knew not what course to adopt. To steal out of the house, dressed as he was, would be to risk immediate capture: for it was into Bow Street that he would have to pass. Every instant was precious: Bealby and his friend would be quickly returning. Even if he flung on some disguise selected from the choice around him, he might encounter them on the stairs—or at the door—or perhaps in the street itself; and the archæologist would raise a hue and cry at the appearance of his own property thus making its escape on the person of a stranger. The position was most critical: but a thought struck the Burker.

"These chaps are as precious a pair of rogues as ever one would wish to meet," he said to himself: and then, hastily drawing from his pocket the bank-notes given him by Marchmont, he counted them over. "Ninety pounds!" he musingly ejaculated; "and these fellers want a matter of twenty or thirty. By jingo, it's my only chance!"

Scarcely had he arrived at this conclusion, when he heard the front door open and shut; and he at once slipped behind the mandarin's robe, which was stretched upon the wooden frame in the same way that gentlemen's morning-gowns are displayed at the doors of haberdashers' shops.

Almost immediately afterwards Bealby and his friend Ben Limber re-entered the room, with a fresh supply of liquor and cigars. It would seem that during their absence some farther conversation on business-matters must have taken place: for as Ben Limber threw himself down upon his seat, he ejaculated, "'Pon my soul, Bealby, this new idea of your's is a capital one! What a terrible nuisance it would be if any one else should take it up——"

"A precious nuisance!" observed Bealby; "and just for the want of about thirty pounds or so! I wish I knew how to get the mummy out of the place without the landlady's knowledge: but it is impossible. She has got the eyes of a lynx; and what's more, when she dunned me for her rent this afternoon, I told her that the old gentleman would come to buy the mummy—and she was satisfied with my promise that she should receive the cash with her own fair hands."

"It is uncommon provoking!" said Ben Limber, in a tone of deep annoyance.

"Provoking? I believe you!" rejoined Bealby. "There's thousands to be made by that idea of mine. I would give anything to get hold of a clear thirty-pound note at this moment—so that we might start fair and unshackled: but where the deuce such a sum is to be got by anything like honest means, I don't know."

"Well, I say, Bealby," observed Mr. Limber, after a few minutes' pause, during which the process of drinking and smoking went on,—"suppose there was any way of raising this money *without* the strictest regard for what the world calls honesty,—what should you say? Mind—I have no settled plan—I'm only just thinking whether we ought to be over nice and particular——"

"Nice and particular indeed!" ejaculated Bealby with contempt: "nothing of the sort! You know enough of me, and you've heard enough to-night, Ben, to be pretty well aware that I shouldn't stick at a trifle: but at the same time, my boy, I try to steer clear of the law as well as I possibly can. Nice and particular indeed! Just to show you how nice and particular I am, I shouldn't mind

accepting a loan from that murderer-fellow who was examined this afternoon at the office a few doors off."

"Which means," observed Mr. Limber approvingly, "that you don't mind where the deuce the money comes from, so long as it *does* come somehow or another."

"You've just hit it, Ben," answered Mr. Bealby.

"Well then, genelmen," a voice was suddenly heard to say, "I thinks as how I can accommodate you."

It would be impossible to describe the alarm which suddenly seized upon Mr. Bealby and Mr. Limber, as this strange, course, uncouth voice met their ears. But with the archæological gentleman this terror was transient enough—whereas with his more timid friend it assumed a most ludicrous aspect. With a ghastly pale countenance, and quivering in every limb, he looked towards the skeleton: thence his affrighted glances travelled to the mummy: and he knew not from which the voice proceeded, though he was firmly impressed with the conviction that from one or the other of those sources did it emanate. Mr. Bealby started up to see what the truth might really be, and what intruder had found his way into his museum, —when the Burker, thinking that the lapse of nearly half a minute was sufficient to prepare the gentlemen for his appearance, slowly emerged from his hiding-place.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Mr. Bealby, not exactly perceiving sufficient of the individual's appearance to make him suspect who he might possibly be: for there was but one candle in the room, and this was burning dimly.

"Yes—who the devil are you?" echoed Mr. Limber, snatching up a tomahawk with one hand and a Roman pipkin in the other.

"I'm a chap as can let you genelmen have the little matter of thirty pound which you seems to stand in need of:"—and as the Burker spoke, he advanced nearer towards the table.

"A Jew!" ejaculated Bealby. "And yet he is not a Jew!—Ah!" and a sudden suspicion flashed to his mind.

"A Jew—and not a Jew?" echoed Mr. Limber, at the same time smitten with the same thought: and then he shuddered, and his teeth chattered, at the idea that he found himself in the presence of the terrible Barney the Burker.

"Now, genelmen, just keep your tongues quiet," said the Burker hastily; "and it will be all the better for you as well as for me. I'm just what you take me for: but here's the thirty pound you say you want and that you don't care a rap whence it comes from. In return for this, what I require is your assistance to help me to escape."

Limber sank with a hollow moan upon a chair, the tomahawk dropping from his hand on one side, the Roman pipkin on the other. He looked aghast. But Bealby was by no means affected in the same sense; and he hastened to say, "Don't be a fool, Limber. What is it to us who this fellow is? There's the blunt—and that's all we care for. Come, Ben," he added, going straight up to his friend and clutching him by the wrist, "don't be a fool, I say! He can't eat us—he doesn't want to do us any harm; and if he did, we are two to one."

These words, hurriedly and whisperingly spoken, produced a speedy effect upon Ben Limber: they inspired him with courage—for a coward invariably derives a reassuring sensation from the fortitude displayed by a braver companion. Starting up to his feet, he exclaimed, "Well, what can we do?"

"You have escaped, I suppose," said Bealby, turning quickly towards the Burker. "But how did you get in here?"

"I've broke out of the cell—I climbed up a pipe—I got to the roof of this house—I crept in at the attic——"

"Ah! the noise just now upon the stairs!" ejaculated Limber.

"To be sure!" rejoined the Burker: "that was me. I didn't know how to get out of the house: I was afeard of wenturing into the street, cos why it's infested by them 'ere waggabones of bluebottles. So I listened at your door—I heard a good deal of what you was saying to each other—I found you was the right sort of chaps to help a poor devil in a difficulty—I bided my time—you went out to get more lush—and then——But, by your leave, talking of lush——"

And the Burker, pouring a quantity of gin into a tumbler, drank it off at a draught,—his eyes scarcely watering, so accustomed was he to the potent alcoholic fluid.

"How can we get the man out?" asked Limber of his friend.

"How long ago was it you escaped from your cell?" demanded Bealby quickly.

"A matter of three quarters of an hour," responded the Burker; "and there's every minute a chance of the discovery being made. If so, as for going out into the street unless unkimmon well disguised——But fust of all give us some hot water to get off this cussed beard."

"Yes, at once!" answered Bealby. "Now I tell you what must be done. Ben my boy, stick your cigar in your mouth—go and saunter down the street towards the police-office and the station —see if there's anything strange going on—— But stop one moment!"

Mr. Bealby rushed to the window—drew aside the blinds—and looked through the panes.

"All seems quiet," he continued, returning from the window; "but we had better make sure. You go, Ben, as I have just said, and keep out for twenty minutes or so——that is to say, supposing you see nothing in the meantime that looks suspicious. But if there is, then come back directly and tell us."

Mr. Limber accordingly lighted his cigar—stuck his hat upon his head with a jaunty, rakish, independent air—and flourishing his short cane (of the true gentish description) was about to issue from the room when the Burker suddenly placed his back against the door, saying in his gruff voice, "This is all wery well: but how the deuce do I know what's the true meaning of the move?"

"I understand you," observed Mr. Bealby, now assuming a decisive look and tone. "You think we mean to betray you. Very well—take up your bank-notes and be off."

"Come, come," said the Burker, "it wasn't 'andsome on my part—I must confess it wasn't."

"You know," rejoined Bealby, "that if we chose to open this window and raise an alarm, your capture would be certain."

"Beg pardon, genelmen, for my rudeness," said

the Burker; "but hope no offence. Here's the door, sir:"—and he opened it to afford egress to Mr. Benjamin Limber.

"Now drink," said Bealby, "and refresh yourself while I go down stairs and see if there's any hot water in the boiler. I know there generally is."

Mr. Barnes sate down and helped himself to some more spirits,—at the same time saying to himself, "Well, blow me if all this isn't a rum tissue of adwentures: but luck seems to be a-favouring of me—and I 'spose I shall get safe and sound through 'em."

In about a couple of minutes Bealby reappeared, with a pitcher of warm water; and he then conducted the Burker into a little dressing-room opening from the inner apartment. The criminal soon disencumbered himself of the beard and the rest of the false hair that was upon his face; and he felt himself considerably refreshed.

"Now, sir, what's the next move?" he asked, as he emerged from the dressing-room.

"You say you've climbed up the pipe and got to the roof of this house," asked Bealby. "Do you think there are any traces——"

"Yes—the pipe's all bended down," responded the Burker.

"Then take off that old black gaberdine and give it to me," said Bealby quickly.

The Burker, perceiving that his new friend had all his wits about him, unhesitatingly complied with his demand. Bealby took from amongst his miscellaneous stores a quantity of very old but very strong silken cord; and throwing the Burker's gaberdine over his arm, he crept up-stairs, having previously taken off his shoes so that he might proceed thus stealthily and avoid disturbing the landlady and her servant. He passed out of the attic window; and peeping over the parapet, looked to see whether all was quiet in the neighbourhood of the cells attached to the police-office. Satisfied on this point, Mr. Bealby crept on to the leads of the next house, and deposited the gaberdine there. He then tied one end of the silken cord round a chimney, and flung the rest over the back part of the house, so that it hung down into the yard attached thereto. Having done this—which was all the work of but three or four minutes—he retraced his stealthy way to his own apartments. There he explained to the Burker what he had done,—adding, "And now I think the police, when they discover your escape, will be thrown completely off the scent."

"Well, blow me," said the Burker, "if arter myself you ain't one of the cleverest chaps in the whole world! But what's the next move?"

"Ah! now we must hold a consultation," responded Bealby; "and we have leisure to do so. The trick I have just played will afford it us; because whenever the hounds pursue, the scent is broken—or I ought to say, turned into the wrong channel. It will never be suspected you are here. You see I am doing everything I can to make things right for you: and these bank-notes," added Bealby, now taking them up from the table, "are well earned."

"So they be," said the Burker. "You're an excellent sort of chap; and there's another ten pun' note to add to t'others:" then as he produced the additional recompense, he thought to himself, "It don't matter how much I pay to make things square and get myself off: my werry partikler and intimate friend the Duke of Marchmont must dub up for it all."

"I was just thinking," said Bealby, "whether I could not give you some such disguise that you might be able to get out of the house at once—— But here's Ben Limber returning!"

Mr. Limber had taken the latch-key with him; and he was therefore enabled to let himself in. He quickly made his appearance in the room; and his countenance indicated that he had intelligence of importance to communicate.

"The shindy's began," he hastily said the instant he had closed the door of the apartment. "There's a running to and fro betwixt the police-office and the station; and I heard one of the constables say in consternation 'He has escaped!'"

"Then it is out of the question," said Bealby, addressing himself to the Burker, "for you to think of leaving this house to-night. There will be a strict watch throughout the entire neighbourhood——"

"But how shall I be better off to-morrow," demanded Barney, "than I am to-night?"

"It is very certain you will not be worse off," rejoined Bealby; "and it will be very strange if we cannot think of some contrivance for your escape. Won't it be strange, Ben?"

"I should rather think it would," ejaculated Mr. Limber. "And yet I don't very well see how——"

"Well, I see everything!" cried Bealby as an idea struck him: but what this idea was, we need not immediately explain:—it will transpire presently.

Meanwhile the escape of the Burker had been discovered: Ben Limber's information in this respect was perfectly accurate. A constable had visited the cell,—first of all, however, only opening the little trap-door, and throwing the light of his bull's-eye inside. But his astonishment and consternation, on perceiving that the prisoner had vanished, may be more easily imagined than described. To raise an alarm was his first proceeding: then, on being joined by two or three other constables, he opened the door of the cell, and the truth became apparent: the mode of the Burker's escape was at once evident. The Inspector was speedily fetched from the station on the opposite side of the street; and a search throughout the neighbourhood was ordered. Constables were despatched in every direction, while the Inspector, with some of the most intelligent of his acolytes, lost no time in surveying the premises in the neighbourhood of the cells. Ladders were procured: they ascended to the roofs of the adjacent houses—the bent pipe was observed—and though the officers could scarcely persuade themselves that they had thus discovered the track taken by the Burker, yet they failed not to act upon the suggestion which it might seem to afford. By means of the ladders they quickly reached the top of the house to which that bent pipe led up, and beneath the roof of which the Burker was actually at that very moment concealed. But it was on the roof of the adjacent house that the old Jewish gaberdine was discovered; and then the Inspector exclaimed, "By heaven! after all the fellow did climb up that pipe!"

Next the cord was found; and the natural conclusion was that it formed another link in the clue which the officers had obtained to the track taken by the Burker.

"You see," said the Inspector, "there was that flat-roofed building betwixt the cells and those yards down below, which prevented the scoundrel from getting into them at once: so he had to climb first of all up to the roofs of these houses here, and then let himself down by this cord into the yard below. But it is no use our remaining here to chatter. Down the ladders again! over all those walls! and we may catch him yet!"

The descent was quickly made. One of the constables, speeding back to the police-court, gave orders for several officers to institute a special watch in Hart Street, which was the quarter where it was supposed the Burker would endeavour to find a means of making his exit. The Inspector, and the constables who remained with him, proceeded to examine all the premises in the rear of Covent Garden Theatre, with the hope of finding some fresh trace of the prisoner—but we need hardly say without any result.

We did not interrupt the thread of those explanations to state, as we must now do, that the occupants of the highest rooms of the houses to the roofs of which the constables ascended, were considerably alarmed—many indeed being startled from their slumber, by the heavy trampling of feet overhead as well as by the sounds of voices. At first there was an idea of fire; and attic-windows were thrown open in consternation and dismay: but the constables speedily reassured the frightened ones and made them acquainted with the reason of so much disturbance. Amongst the terrified persons to whom we have just alluded, were the landlady and the servant of the house in which Mr. Bealby dwelt: but on receiving the intelligence that there was no alarm of fire, and that the constables were merely in pursuit of a prisoner who had escaped, they retired to their respective couches again. We may add that the drawing-room storey of that house—namely, the floor just under Mr. Bealby's apartments—was unoccupied at the time: the ground-floor consisted of offices where no person remained at night; and thus, besides the landlady and her servant, there was nobody within the walls of the dwelling to be disturbed by the proceedings of the police.

It was now certain that the whole neighbourhood was closely watched by constables; and it was therefore impossible for the Burker to attempt an escape. It became absolutely necessary for him to remain in Bealby's apartments till the morning—when the idea which the archæological gentleman had already formed to effect his safe issue, might be carried out. Mr. Limber was anxious to get away and seek his bed in an attic which he occupied in some neighbourhood a couple of miles off: but Bealby would not let him depart.

"Deuce a bit, Ben!" he said, in a hurried whisper to his friend: "you and I must remain together until this fellow is safe out of the house. Though I am not afraid of him as long as I am awake, I don't choose to stand the chance of falling off to sleep if left alone with him. We will drink and smoke till morning, Ben."

Mr. Bealby had found the opportunity of whispering these few hasty words while the Burker was paying his respects to a half-quartern loaf and one-third of a Dutch cheese which had been set before him; and as many hours had elapsed since food passed his lips, it was with a terrific appetite that he now consumed the only fare which the archæological gentleman's larder (or rather cupboard) afforded.

"Now," said Bealby, when Barnes had finished his meal and had washed it down with a copious draught of gin-and-water, "you can step into that back room, stretch yourself on the sofa, and take a good nap. My friend and I purpose to sit up for the rest of the night. There is every reason to believe that you are safe; and in the morning we will carry out the idea which I just now described."

The Burker, who had now every possible reason to put implicit faith in Mr. Bealby and Ben Limber, withdrew to the sofa—or rather the old sofa-bedstead to which he was directed in the adjoining room: while the two friends sate drinking and smoking in the front apartment.

CHAPTER CXVII.

THE MUMMY'S CASE.

It was about seven o'clock when the Burker awoke from a deep uninterrupted slumber of several hours; and he found his host and Ben Limber performing their ablutions in the dressing-room. These two individuals neither felt nor looked any the better for having sat up drinking and smoking the entire night: but the contact of cold water refreshed them somewhat. The hour was approaching when the servant-girl of the house would enter to spread Mr. Bealby's breakfast-table; and he could not possibly devise any excuse to prevent her from thus coming in—or at least it was deemed advisable to avoid everything that might tend to excite suspicion.

"The girl may take it into her head to do out the dressing-room while we are getting breakfast," said Bealby; "or to sweep out the inner room—or a dozen different things. We must dispose of you, somehow or another," he added, turning towards the Burker.

"Any way you like, so as you doesn't give me over to the police, or manage matters so bad that you get me took again."

"Don't be afraid," answered Bealby. "Here, get some food at once—eat and drink. Now, Ben, you just stroll out as if to look at the flowers in Covent Garden Market before breakfast: you can hear what is being said about last night's business—you can buy a newspaper too; and if you come back in about ten minutes, our breakfast will be ready, and I shall have disposed of the Burker by some means or another."

"All right," responded Ben Limber: and he issued from the apartment.

"Now you know the idea which I explained last night," said Bealby, addressing himself to the Burker, who was devouring bread and cheese.

"About that queer-looking object which seems like a man that had been dried with the sun until he turned into leather? Well," added the

Burker, "I recollect perfectly that the idea was a good 'un."

"In five words I will explain it over again," interjected Mr. Bealby. "My landlady knows that the mummy is going away this morning; and so she won't be surprised to see the large case sent out of the house. You must get into that case with the least possible delay; and when Ben Limber comes back and says that things are all right—I mean that no sort of suspicion attaches itself to this place——"

"Deuce a bit!—there's no suspicion!" said the Burker; "or else the police would be precious soon down upon us. But you was going to say what was to be done when that friend of yourn comes back."

"He shall get a cart to put the case in: that case will contain you, my man; and then you can be conveyed out of London. That is all I can do for you: and I suppose that whenever you are free in the open country——"

"You can leave me to shift for myself," interjected the Burker. "But there's just one thing I should like to know: and this is——"

"I think I understand what you mean," said Bealby: "there will be a driver to the cart, and you do not see how he is to be managed? Leave this to me. I shall go with him to pretend to show him the way, and also to see that the mummy is carefully delivered. Don't be under any apprehension as to the result."

"Not I indeed," exclaimed the Burker, "now that I know you are going with the cart."

"Let us get to work," said Bealby, "before the servant girl comes in. You have done eating and drinking?"

The Burker answered in the affirmative. The mummy was taken out of the case and deposited in a trunk, where it was locked up. The case—which indeed was an old coffin, and of solid materials, but having a glass door instead of a lid—was now laid flat upon the floor; and Bealby bade the Burker enter it.

"But I shall want a bit of a disguise," said Barney: "for it's no use turning me adrift only half-togged as I am: I should deuced soon be nabbed by the police."

"I had not forgotten all this," replied Mr. Bealby: "but I meant to take a disguise with me, so that you might put it on when emerging from the case. I thought it would make you too big to lie down in that box."

"Well, what is it?" asked the Burker, sweeping his looks around upon the various articles aggregated in that museum.

"What do you say to dressing yourself up as a poor Lascar sailor?" inquired Mr. Bealby. "Here's a costume—I have a dye for your flesh—a dye also for your hair—and a thick black moustache. And then, too, a Lascar's disguise has this advantage—that you may pretend to be dumb if you like, or else not to understand the English language; so you won't be compelled to speak to a single soul that you may happen to encounter. If you don't like that disguise, I can dress you up as the old Norwood Gipsy——"

"What! as a o'oman?" exclaimed the Burker. "No, no—none of that 'ere!"

"Hush! not so loud! We must not be heard talking in this room; because I am supposed to be alone here."

"Well, I decide upon the Rascal sailor," said the Burker.

"The Lascar sailor, you mean," observed Bealby, with a smile.

"I des-say it's all the same—Lascar or Rascal," responded the Burker. "I think I'd rayther put on the disguise at once: I'm pretty sure as how I can stuff myself into that there box; and it will save a world of trouble when we get to the place where you mean to let me out."

"Good!" ejaculated Mr. Bealby. "Make haste and apparel yourself. Here! let me assist at the toilet: it will only be the work of a few minutes."

The archæological gentleman speedily produced a bottle of dye for the complexion, and which figured in the catalogue of his curiosities as an extraordinary liquid which some newly discovered tribe of Central South America were accustomed to use for staining their skins. He next produced a hair dye, which also had its appropriate legend in the same catalogue, and which legend was about as true as the one attached to the first-mentioned pigment. These two dyes were speedily used with such effect that the Burker's appearance underwent a complete transformation, which was rendered all the more perfect by the jetty moustache, artistically affixed, and concealing the defect in the miscreant's upper lip. The Lascar garb was assumed; and Mr. Barnes felt himself to be a new man.

Benjamin Limber now returned, with a morning newspaper, in which there was a paragraph of only a few lines in respect to the Burker's escape; for the lateness of the hour at which it had occurred, prevented the penny-a-liner who reported it from entering more elaborately into detail. It recorded the bare fact,—with the addition that in spite of all the efforts of the police the miscreant had not been discovered up to the hour when that paragraph was written—namely, at about one o'clock in the morning.

"Everybody is talking of it in Covent Garden Market," observed Ben Limber; "and the general impression is that you, my man, must have managed to get safe out of London. One thing is very certain—the police are altogether off the scent: for telegraphic messages have been despatched along all the lines, and three or four detectives have gone off in different directions. This is what I heard in Covent Garden; and so you see your continued presence in the neighbourhood of the scene of your exploit is not suspected."

"All this is most favourable," observed Bealby. "And now, my man, into the box with you, if you can stuff yourself in!"

The glass front opened like a door, or lid: Bealby raised it—and the Burker, assisted by Ben Limber, laid himself down in the coffin-like case. He completely filled it; and he growlingly muttered something about "having his limbs precious well cramped before he got out of that cussed box again."

"At all events it is better than dancing upon nothing," observed Ben Limber.

Mr. Bealby broke out a small fragment of the glass in one corner of the lid, for the purpose of letting in the fresh air: then the lid was closed and securely latched. A quantity of old rusty green-baize was spread upon the floor; and while Ben Limber raised the head of the coffin-like box,

Mr. Bealby proceeded to wrap the stuff round the case so that it covered the glass lid. A quantity of twine was wound round and round the coffin, in order to keep the baize in the position in which it was folded; and thus far the work was complete.

"Now," said Bealby, "the girl shall lay the breakfast-table; and I will go and settle with the landlady—or else I know very well she will not let the case go out of the house."

"But you will be parting with fifteen pounds?" whispered Ben Limber, with an air of discontent.

"I am certain to sell the mummy for twenty pounds to-day," responded Bealby; "and therefore in any case I must pay the old woman her rent. Besides, I have forty pounds in my pocket; and when I have settled the rent we shall still have twenty-five left. That fellow has got money," added Bealby, drawing his friend Limber apart; "and I must get some more out of him when the moment of liberation comes."

There was now a knock at the room door; and the servant-girl of the house made her appearance.

"That's right—lay the breakfast, Mary," said Mr. Bealby; "and be quick about it—for I've got to go out on business almost directly. There's the mummy to be taken to old Mr. Fossilton's house——"

"Beg your parding, sir," said a shrill voice of command coming from the passage outside; "but nothing leaves this house until my rent's paid. You know the agreement of yesterday, sir," continued the landlady—for she was the speaker; and she now pushed her way past the servant-girl into the room: "I am to receive the money when Mr. Fossilton comes—leastways, fifteen pounds of it, for rent and things which is due——"

"Softly, softly, my good woman!" said Mr. Bealby, assuming an air of dignity: "you must not treat people as if they were all a pack of swindlers."

"Swindlers, forsooth!" cried the landlady, who possessed a very vixenish countenance, and the short tip of whose nose, habitually red with drinking, was now still more inflamed with passion. "I don't like to use a harsh term, sir—but you yourself said it. I suppose now you are going to try and chouse me out of my rent, and to smuggle that there mummy out of the house?——Why, bless me, Mary! if it isn't packed up all ready!"—and it was with a perfect scream of rage that the landlady vociferated these words.

"Don't be foolish," exclaimed Bealby: "here is your money:"—at the same time he produced the bundle of bank-notes which he had received from the Burker. "My friend Mr. Limber brought me last night a remittance that I had been expecting: but as you, my good woman, had gone to bed I did not choose to disturb you."

"Oh! dear me, sir, it is not of the slightest consequence," said the landlady, her entire manner changing from enraged insolence to cringing servility. "I hope I have given no offence. I knew the rent was safe—I always said so to you, Mary—didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am, to be sure," responded the servant-girl, readily corroborating her mistress's falsehood.

"And I'm sure, sir," continued the landlady, "if I did press you for the rent, it was only because my landlord is so very hard upon me——"

"Well, well," interrupted Bealby, who was impatient to finish the scene; "there's your money—you can give me the receipt presently. I say, Limber, by the bye,"—and he turned towards his friend—"would you mind stepping round into Covent Garden while Mary is getting breakfast ready, and just see if you can hire a cart—a light one, with springs, you know, to convey the mummy to Mr. Fossilton's house."

"To be sure," responded Limber: and off he set.

The landlady gathered up the bank-notes which Bealby had thrown down upon the table; and with three or four curtsies she issued from the room—promising to fetch the receipt as soon as possible. Mary continued her preparations for the breakfast; and thus far things had progressed comfortably enough. The rent was settled—there could be no possible impediment to the removal of the case—and Bealby had purposely directed Limber, in the presence of the landlady, to go and fetch a cart, so that he might have the appearance of acting in a perfectly straightforward manner, without being anxious to conceal anything. But scarcely had the landlady got down stairs, when a double knock at the front door caused her to hasten and answer the summons.

It was an old gentleman of past sixty, to whom she gave admittance. He was tall and thin—dressed in black—and stooping slightly. He wore green glasses of the description called shades, as if for weak eyes or bad sight. He walked with a cane: he took a great deal of snuff—and not in a very cleanly manner, as his shirt-frill indicated. His face was very thin and very much wrinkled: his features were sharp; and he had a habit of puckering up his lips as he looked steadfastly at any object. This was Mr. Fossilton—a man of deep learning in everything connected with archæology, and of profound ignorance in everything that related to all other matters. He had written elaborate works upon subjects which scarcely interested fifty people in the whole country, but which he fancied had an interest for the entire world. He could make a speech of three hours' duration on an old pipkin dug out—or represented to have been digged out of Herculaneum: but he could scarcely say three words on any topic which people generally choose to converse upon. His house was full of curiosities,—or what he believed to be curiosities: he had spent nearly his whole fortune on things which he prized as being of inestimable value, but for the whole collection of which no plodding matter-of-fact person would have given him eighteenpence. Photography, the steam-engine, the railway, the electric telegraph, and all the brilliant discoveries or inventions of modern science, were with him as nothing in comparison with broken old china, bits of Roman cement, and other antique relics. He considered it of far greater importance to the world to find a clue to the reading of Egyptian hieroglyphics, than to contribute in the slightest degree to the progress of modern intelligence. Such was Mr. Fossilton—the type of that class who prefer groping their way through the darkness of the tombs and sepulchres in which antiquity lies buried, than to bask in the light of the knowledge of the nineteenth century.

"Is Mr. Bealby at home?" he at once inquired of the landlady.

"Yes, sir," she responded. "Pray walk up, sir: I know that he will see you at once. He has packed up the mummy all ready to send home to your house——"

"Capital!" ejaculated Mr. Fossilton, with accents of delight. "To tell you the truth, my dear madam—knowing from what you whispered to me yesterday, how poor Bealby was pressed for money—I was afraid that he might go and find another customer for that mummy of his; and I would not for the world have let it slip through my fingers. I know it is at least three thousand years old—the state of the wrappers proves it."

"Pray walk up, sir: I know Mr. Bealby will be very glad to see you. He has sent out to hire a cart to take the mummy up to your house," continued the garrulous landlady: "I dare say it will be here in a few minutes."

"Excellent!" ejaculated Mr. Fossilton. "Do you know, ma'am, there is food in that mummy——"

"Food in the mummy, sir?" cried the landlady, almost shrieking out in her astonishment.

"I mean food for the mind, my dear madam," responded the archæologist,—"food for a disquisition of at least six hours! Oh, the pleasure of unfolding the wrappings of that mummy! But I believe that I am to hand over the price to you?"

"Well, not exactly, sir," replied the landlady: "circumstances is now changed. Mr. Bealby is a very honourable gentleman—he has paid me my rent——But pray walk up, sir: he is just going to sit down to his breakfast; and his friend Mr. Limber—a very nice young gentleman, who brought him the money—will be back in a few minutes."

Bealby had heard the double knock at the front door; and at first he had thought it was Limber

who might have forgotten to take the latch-key. But when two or three minutes elapsed and Ben did not make his appearance, Mr. Bealby began to get uneasy lest inquiries were being made relative to the Burker. He did not dare leave his apartments to step out upon the landing to listen—much less to steal down stairs to see who it was—because Mary was running to and fro, preparing the breakfast: he knew her to be inquisitive, and he feared that she might be seized with the inclination to draw aside the green baize and peep into the coffin-like box in order to see how the mummy looked when lying flat upon its back. Thus Bealby was kept in a state of anxiety for several minutes, until he at length recognised the footsteps and then the voice of Mr. Fossilton as he ascended the stairs in company with the landlady.

Mr. Bealby foresaw that he should have some difficulty in respect to this visit: for Fossilton might ask to have another look at the mummy before he concluded the bargain—or he might insist upon taking it away with him; and Bealby, well acquainted with his landlady's garrulous disposition, was quite certain she had already acquainted him with the supposed fact that the mummy was in readiness for such immediate transport to its destination. However, Mr. Bealby hoped that the difficulty occasioned by Fossilton's visit might be speedily surmounted by his own ready wit; and he therefore prepared himself for the emergency.

"I am sure I did right to tell you to walk up, sir," said the landlady, who since she had received her rent was all civility, and was now prepared to make herself most officiously obliging. "Mr. Bealby will be quite charmed to see you. You will find the mummy already packed up ——"

"Well, well, ma'am," said Mr. Fossilton, "you have told me so two or three times; and I have no doubt it is the case. How do you do, Mr. Bealby?"

"How do you do, my dear sir?" cried the younger archæologist. "Pray walk in. Your visit is an early one—I am sorry to say I am excessively busy just at this moment——"

"Busy in getting your breakfast?" said Mr. Fossilton: "but that won't prevent us from settling our little bargain. I have brought the money—and I understand your friend has gone for the cart ——"

"Here it is!" exclaimed the officious landlady, rushing to the window, as she heard the sounds of the vehicle stopping at her front door.

"Ah! but I have a few other goods to remove first," said Mr. Bealby; "and the mummy shall come next. You need not pay me now, Mr. Fossilton: I will bring you up the mummy in the course of the day—a few hours indeed——"

"My dear sir," interrupted the old archæologist, "I have set my mind upon having it at once: I have walked down from Tavistock Square at this early hour on purpose to see you. You can let me have this cart—and your friend can hire another."

"I can do nothing of the sort," said Mr. Bealby, who was getting uncommonly anxious, though he dared not for the life of him betray his uneasiness. "I must remove some goods first——"

"Stop! there is another cart!" ejaculated the landlady; "and it is a man which I know and which sells pertaties. Mary!" she shrieked forth from the landing to which she flew; "stop that pertatie person—and say I have got him a job!"

"What the devil does all this mean?" demanded Ben Limber, as he now made his appearance. "I have hired a cart, and made a capital bargain."

"And now there are two," said Mr. Fossilton: "therefore I may at once take my mummy home. Here, Mr. Bealby, is the amount agreed upon—twenty pounds:" and the old archæologist, producing his pocket-book, drew forth the bank-notes from amidst a profusion of documents, all relating to his favourite science—especially a copy of a speech of seven hours' duration which he delivered at the last meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

Ben Limber now understood it all; and he perceived in what an awkward dilemma his friend Bealby appeared to be placed. But Mr. Bealby had by this time made up his mind how to act; and he therefore said with great coolness, "Well, Mr. Fossilton, since you are in such a hurry to become possessed of the mummy, we will conclude the bargain at once. Here it is:"—and he opened the trunk to which it had been consigned on being taken from the glass case.

"Well, dear me!" exclaimed the landlady, "I thought it was in that package which was already done up to be removed."

"I wish, ma'am," said Bealby, "you would have the goodness to leave me to manage my own business."

"Oh! well, sir, I'm sure I don't want to interfere," said the landlady, tossing her head indignantly. "I was only helping to the best of my ability: but I hope I may never speak another word if you didn't say just now—or leastways give us all to understand, that the big package yonder——"

"There's something strange in all this," said Mr. Fossilton. "Are you sure it's the same mummy you are now selling me,—the same that used to stand in the glass case——"

"Look you, Mr. Fossilton," interrupted Bealby; "a few words will explain it all. I have got some articles of a delicate and peculiar kind which I have sold to a gentleman; and I have packed them up in the glass case. For that reason I put the mummy into the trunk. Your profound knowledge will show you that it is the same mummy. Here it is, with its wrappers—I forget how many years old you pronounced it to be."

"Well, well," said the old gentleman, who in the meantime had been carefully examining the mummy through his green glasses: "it certainly does seem the same—it is no doubt all right. And now let it be conveyed in that trunk down to the cart."

"Here, ma'am," said Bealby, thus hastily whispering to his landlady, "just give the potato person, as you called him, a little drop of gin to drink, as it was very civil on his part to stop when Mary called him:"—and he thrust a shilling into the woman's hand.

She sped away to give one drop of gin to the potatoe person, and bestow half a dozen upon herself: a cord was put round the trunk; and Limber,

assisted by Mary, conveyed it down-stairs—old Mr. Fossilton following. The instant they were gone, Bealby closed the door: and hastening to pull aside a portion of the green baize, he whisperingly asked, "Are you all right? have you got enough air?"

"Blow me," growled the Burker, "if I could have foreseen there was a-going to be such a precious shindy as all this——"

"Well, never mind — everything will be all right!" answered Bealby. "We will soon get you down into the other cart: I shall drive off with you—in half-an-hour the open fields will be gained beyond Holloway—and then you will be free as air."

"Make haste then," said the Burker from the depth of the coffin-like box; "for I'm so preciously squeeged and scrouged up here, I don't think as how I shall ever get the use of my limbs again."

Bealby sped to the window; and looking out, saw that the trunk containing the mummy, was just being consigned to the cart driven by the potato person, as the landlady most elegantly called him. Old Mr. Fossilton was helped up by Ben Limber into the vehicle: and seating himself upon the trunk, he took a huge pinch of snuff in complacent and satisfactory anticipation of the pleasure he was shortly to enjoy in unrolling the bandages which for three thousand years, as he thought, had enveloped his precious acquisition!

The potato person whipped the horse—the animal started off—but unfortunately at that very instant the rod or bar which kept the body of the cart tight down upon the shafts, accidentally came out. Up tilted the cart; and lo and behold! trunk, archæologist, and potato person were all pitched backward into the street. The cord fastening the trunk, either snapped or became untied; and out rolled the mummy. Mr. Bealby beheld the accident from his window, and gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled rage and disappointment.

A crowd instantaneously collected; and as Mr. Fossilton raised himself up with difficulty from the stones on which he had been so rudely flung, he thrust his elbow into the mummy's mouth, and sent the hideous looking apology for a face crashing in.

"My eyes, here's a go!" shouted a man from the Market, with half a dozen ropes of onions pendant to a stout stick over his shoulder, and a short clay pipe in his mouth.

"Hooray!" vociferated another individual from the same precincts, and who bore a basket of cabbages upon his head.

But those who were nearest to the scene of the accident, looked on with mingled dismay and horror: for the first glimpse they had caught of the hideous shape, as it rolled out of the trunk, naturally inspired those feelings.

"My mummy—O my poor mummy!" moaned Mr. Fossilton, who was reduced to despair.

"What's the old genelman a saying?" asked a ragged boy of a dilapidated costermonger.

"Vy, don't you hear?" was the response: "he's a calling out for his mammy."

"My eyes!" cried another: "he's raythera an old boy to be afeard that his mother should know he's out:"—and this jest was received with uproarious laughter.

"It's his mummy, you fool," said a somewhat superior species of the Market population; for the speaker had on some great holiday visited a museum of curiosities. "That's a mummy—most likely a King of Egypt, which died three or four thousand years ago and was preserved in bandages just as you preserve inguns in vinegar."

"A mummy indeed!" said a man, with a leathern apron on, who having emerged from the nearest public-house, had worked his way through the crowd with the well-meant purpose of rendering his assistance. "A rum looking mummy this here! It's uncommon like leather."

Thus speaking, the aproned individual took up a piece of the smashed countenance; and first breaking it into minuter fragments, he put a morsel between his teeth.

"Oh, the cannibal! Blowed if he ain't eating the mummy!" ejaculated several voices; and the foremost of the crowd gazed with a kind of awe-felt curiosity upon the mummy; and with mingled surprise and disgust upon the man in the leathern apron.

"Mummy indeed!" exclaimed this individual scornfully. "I 'spose you'll tell me next that I don't know what leather is. I haven't been a cobbler for these twenty-three years without knowing summut about the article I works with."

"Leather!" cried the indignant Mr. Fossilton, forgetting his accident—forgetting the crowd—forgetting the public place in which the scene was occurring—forgetting indeed everything except the sense of insult he was now smarting under at the idea of the gross manner in which the reputation of his mummy was assailed. "Leather? I tell you that this is a mummy—the corpse of some distinguished person of an ancient age—three thousand years old if it's a single day!—and that I'll swear by the wrappings! I am ashamed of you, my man. If it were an old shoe on which you were called to pass an opinion, it would be all very well."

"Three thousand year old—stuff and nonsense!" ejaculated the cobbler disdainfully. "I tell you it's leather—burnt, scorched, or something—— And, by jingo! if I don't think it's some that I sold a genelman which lives up there in the second storey of that there house, and which is knowed to be uncommon clever at getting up these here sort of things."

At this crisis Mr. Limber, who had hitherto remained upon the spot to listen to what was taking place, was seized with a panic; and he sped away as fast as his legs would carry him. The unfortunate archæologist Mr. Fossilton began to look terribly crestfallen. He stooped down—took another green view of the mummy through his glasses—then pulled off the glasses themselves—and examined it more closely with his naked eyes. He could no longer conceal from himself that he had been grossly deceived. If the accident had not occurred to the mummy, breaking a portion of it, and thus showing of what it was composed, the probability is the cheat never would have been discovered, and Mr. Fossilton would have gone down to his grave in the happy conviction that he died in possession of a human relic thirty centuries of age. But now unfortunately the delusion was dissipated—the vision was dispelled—and this learned archæologist found that he had given twenty pounds for the mere purpose of being egregiously laughed

at, jeered, gibed, joked, and taunted by a motley crowd of some two hundred persons.

His orders were quickly issued to the driver of the cart—or the potato person, as Mr. Bealby's landlady politely and courteously designated him. The mummy was thrust back into the trunk—the trunk was taken upon the shoulders of the potato person,—who, preceded by the indignant Mr. Fossilton, began to ascend the stairs towards Mr. Bealby's apartments.

The little scene which we have described from the moment of the tilting up of the cart, to that when the unfortunate mummy was being borne back to him who had manufactured and vended it, occupied about five minutes. Let us see what in the interim had taken place in the apartments of Bealby himself.

From his window the fabricator of curiosities had observed the catastrophe; and he had seen the cobbler emerge from the public-house. In him he recognised the very man of whom he had bought the old leather which formed one of the component parts of the mummy. Then he perceived his friend Mr. Benjamin Limber vanishing from the scene; and he felt convinced that some disturbance would ensue.

"Deuce take it!" he exclaimed, retreating from the window, and hastening back to the case in which the Burker was coffined. "Here's an accident!—the cart has upset—the mummy has tumbled out—— I think the trick is discovered!"

"What trick?" exclaimed the Burker, with so sudden a start, convulsively given inside the case, that it was a wonder he did not smash the glass lid above him.

"Nothing about *you!*" replied Bealby hastily. "That cursed mummy I mean!"—and back again! he ran to the window. "As I live, that old scoundrel Fossilton is having the mummy brought back! I shall be compelled to disgorge the twenty pounds!"

"I say," vociferated the Burker from the glass case, "I've had enough of this—I can stand it no longer! Just let me out. My limbs is all cramped—a hundred million needles and pins is a pricking my feet. Let me out, I say!—or I shall be suffocated."

"Stop! an idea strikes me!" ejaculated Bealby. "What if I get old Fossilton to take you off to his house——But no! it will never do!"

"And why not?" asked the Burker. "Blowed if I don't think it's the best thing to be done. Just leave me to manage the old rogue when I do get to his house——"

"No, no!" responded Bealby: "no harm—no violence!"

"Nonsense! I'll only frighten him out of his life——"

"It must be so!" said Bealby. "Hush!—they are mounting the stairs!"—and he turned to meet the indignant archæologist, whose cane was fiercely tapping every step as he led the way to the second storey.

CHAPTER CXVIII.

THE ARCHÆOLOGIST.

THE landlady, who had been standing at her front door to look at the accident, the crowd, and the disturbance, made way for Mr. Fossilton and the potato person to enter. Then, closing the door in the face of the crowd that came to peep in with intense curiosity, she followed the enraged archæologist and the bearer of the trunk up the stairs,—not rightly comprehending what had taken place, and therefore all the more anxious to push herself into Bealby's apartments.

"Here, sir, is a pretty trick you've played me!" exclaimed Mr. Fossilton, as he entered Bealby's front room.

"One word, my dear sir," said the ready-witted Mr. Bealby. "Here are your bank-notes: but just allow me to explain myself—and if my explanation is not satisfactory, you can take your money and be off with you. Here, you man, put down that trunk—there's half-a-crown for you—and take yourself off with your cart. Just have the kindness to tell that other carter who is waiting, to remain yet a little while; and I will settle with him also."

Mr. Bealby issued his instructions with much composure and self-possession: the trunk containing the unfortunate mummy was deposited upon the floor—the potato person touched his hat for the half-crown, and took his departure.

"Now, my dear ma'am," said Bealby to the landlady, thrusting another shilling into her hand, "just get something to comfort you after all this disturbance—and leave me to explain matters to my friend Mr. Fossilton."

The landlady accordingly vanished: the door was closed—and the old archæologist, assuming a peremptory air, said, "Now, Mr. Bealby, for these explanations."

"They are speedily given," was Bealby's ready response. "It is all nonsense about crying down the mummy, and all falsehood that the cobbler told you, just because I happened to owe him for a pair of shoes. Pray don't interrupt me! I see that you think the mummy to be worthless: you are prejudiced——Well, let it be granted that it *is* an imposture——I at least took it for a genuine article. However, it was not the one you were going to have sent up to you——"

"How? what do you mean?" demanded Mr. Fossilton.

"You bought the mummy in the glass case—and there it is, ready packed to be sent to you. I said so from the very first——"

"Ah! but you afterwards denied it," said Mr. Fossilton: "you told me likewise you had packed other things in the glass case——"

"All nonsense on my part!" ejaculated Bealby. "You saw that young gentleman who was with me—the one who went and fetched the cart? Well, he came to buy a mummy—this was last night—he took a fancy to the one in the glass case, and offered me fifty pounds for it. I agreed—but I did not mean to let him have it: I intended it all along for you. I meant to give him another——in short, that very one that the hubbub has just been about. But he came early this morning to secure his bar-

gain—you came shortly after—you both bewildered and confused me—I scarcely know how to act——"

"Ah! ha!" said Mr. Fossilton: "I begin to understand! So the real mummy—*my* mummy—is in that glass case after all?"

"Yes—and you may take it away with you at once!" said Bealby: "the cart is at the door. Stop!—there's no need to go peeping through the baize! Here's your twenty pounds—examine the mummy as much as you like when you get it home at your own house—consult all your friends—and if I have deceived you, tell me I'm a rogue. But if not, send me the money by post—or by hand—or bring it to me——anything you like, only be quick and let us make an end of the business!"

Mr. Fossilton evidently thought this a very fair, candid, and straightforward proposal. He therefore took back the bank-notes from Mr. Bealby—and said, "Well, I accept the arrangement. You know I am a man of honour: if the mummy suits, I will pay you."

"Good!" ejaculated Mr. Bealby: "that will do. I mean to accompany you to your own house, just to see the case safely delivered, and assure myself that there is no farther accident. Have the kindness to call over the landing for Mary, that she may bid the carter come up and help me down with the package."

Mr. Fossilton did as he was desired; and Mr. Bealby, hastily approaching the case, whispered through the hole in the glass lid, "It is all right!"

"So much the better," growled the Burker from within.

Bealby gave a last look, but a careful and scrutinizing one at the green baize and the cordage, to assure himself that the box was completely enveloped in the wrapper. A few moments afterwards the man whose cart had been hired by Ben Limber, made his appearance in the room. He was a strong burly fellow; and by his stalwart limbs, his broad shoulders and capacious chest, seemed quite capable of carrying the package without any assistance. Therefore, when Mr. Bealby lent his succour, the carter did not complain of the weight, although the Burker was assuredly not the lightest individual in existence.

"You see," said Bealby, as they descended the stairs, "the box containing this mummy is lined with tin,—which makes it heavy; for I don't suppose the mummy itself weighs above half a dozen pounds, wrappers and all."

"Lord bless you, sir! the weight's nothing," responded the carter. "If you worked in Common Garden, as I do, and had to carry a vaggin-load of taters, or cabbages, or what not, upon your shoulders at times when unloadin' the market-carts, you wouldn't talk about this here package being heavy."

"Well, I am glad you do not complain," said Mr. Bealby; "and if you are very careful in the business, and don't disturb this green baize at all, or let the air get into the box, you shall have an extra crown for your trouble."

This assurance greatly delighted the carter; and he resolved by his carefulness to win the present which was thus promised. The front door was opened: the crowd had by this time dispersed, with the impression that there was nothing more to see; and Mr. Bealby had the supreme satisfaction of beholding the package safely consigned to the cart.

"Do you mean to go with us?" he hastily demanded of Mr. Fossilton.

"To be sure!" responded the archæologist, who would not for the world lose sight of the precious object which had already cost him so much trouble.

"Then jump up! be quick about it!" said Mr. Bealby; "and let us be off—or else we shall have more loiterers collecting in the hope of beholding another accident."

The cart drove away: and Mr. Bealby began to breathe more freely. He had succeeded in getting the Burker out of his house; and this was a most important achievement after all the adverse circumstances which had occurred. For he knew perfectly well that if it were discovered that he had harboured the escaped murderer, he would have drawn down upon his own head the vengeance of the law. How the Burker might presently extricate himself from the embarrassing position in which he would be placed, when Fossilton should proceed to take off the green baize wrapper,—was a subject of comparative indifference with Mr. Bealby: for he was resolved in his own mind not to return to his lodging until by some means or another he should be satisfied that the adventure issued in a way which was not likely to compromise himself.

Mr. Fossilton's house in Tavistock Square was reached in safety. The old gentleman was a bachelor: he kept but two servants,—one being a cook, who was more ancient, more blind, and more deaf than himself—the other being a country girl who acted as housemaid, and who being inexperienced in London life, was devoid of any impertinent curiosity. There was a side-entrance to Mr. Fossilton's abode; and it was here that the cart halted. The package was safely conveyed into a room on the ground floor, which served as the archæologist's museum: the carter was liberally remunerated according to promise—Mr. Bealby lost not an instant in taking himself off—and Mr. Fossilton was now left alone with the baize-covered package, which had been deposited upon the floor in the middle of the room.

First of all locking the door, so that he might not be disturbed by the entrance of any of those archæological friends who were in the habit of frequently dropping in to discuss the very interesting and useful subjects to which they so wisely devoted the whole attention and business of their lives,—Mr. Fossilton took a knife and proceeded deliberately to cut the cords which retained the green baize so closely wrapped round the glass case. Then he took a pair of scissors, and began to cut away the green baize from the top; because, inasmuch as it was folded two or three times round the case, he would have had to lift the case itself to remove the baize unless he adopted this shorter and easier plan of cutting it. He was very careful in the operation, for fear of breaking the glass lid: and, as the reader will comprehend, when he had cut one fold lengthways, he had to do precisely the same to each successive layer of the enveloping cloth. Proceeding thus deliberately, Mr. Fossilton did not choose to take a peep into the case until the proper moment should arrive, when he could at one glance embrace the entire contents thereof. He did not wish to anticipate the pleasure which he flattered

himself he was about to enjoy. Thus, slowly and gradually did he prosecute his work, in a methodical manner, until the last fold of the wrapper was cut through, and the whole of the baize fell away from the lid of the box!

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mr. Fossilton: and he peered in mingled astonishment and dismay over the object which now met his view. "This is very strange!—very strange indeed! Why—how—what—eh?"

It certainly did *not* look like a mummy. The dress was white; there was a sort of turban on the head—the complexion of the individual was quite dark—there was a moustache upon the lip. Surely this was no mummy? And yet what else could it be? The eyelids were closed:—motionless as the dead lay the Burker!

Mr. Fossilton stooped lower down, and looked closer and closer into the case—or rather, we should say, through the glass lid. If this were a mummy it was the most extraordinary one, as well as the freshest, he had ever seen. Had Bealby deceived him? No: this was scarcely possible; because he had given him back his money—he had left himself at his mercy in respect to payment—everything seemed quite honourable, straightforward, and proper on that individual's part. Ah! a sudden thought struck Mr. Fossilton. Mr. Bealby had prepared for him a great surprise! How kind of Bealby!—how good of him! Doubtless it was some wondrous novelty in the sphere of what we may term Mummyism, which through the agency of that same excellent Mr. Bealby had now fallen into his hands! Enraptured with the thought, Mr. Fossilton opened the glass case, and was in the act of stretching forward his hand to touch the countenance of the supposed mummy,—when the Burker suddenly opened his eyes and raised himself up to a sitting posture!

It was not exactly terror which seized upon Mr. Fossilton: it was a general stupefaction—a paralysis of the senses, which, without absolutely depriving him of his consciousness, made him sink down upon a seat and gaze through his green spectacles, as well as open-mouthed, upon this extraordinary proceeding.

"Don't be afeard, old genelman: I ain't agoing to eat you," said the Burker, as he now endeavoured to rise up completely from the interior of the case: but the task was a difficult one, his limbs being horribly cramped. "Well, I'm blowed if this here ain't pleasant—cuss it!"

Mr. Fossilton groaned—but did not move one hair's-breadth more than if he had been a veritable statue, or one of his own petrifactions placed in that chair.

"Well, I'm sniggered if this ain't a pretty job!" continued the Burker, growling savagely: "to get one's legs as palsied as if they was frozen—blow me, it beats the gallows—beats it hollow!"

Here Mr. Fossilton, abruptly seized with the terrifying effect of a complete and utter revulsion of feelings, sprang from his seat and darted towards the door. The sense of sudden and frightful danger to which he thus became exposed, acted like galvanism upon the Burker; and rushing after the archæologist, he grasped him violently by the arm.

"Hold your tongue!—don't cry out—don't say a single word!" growled the Burker: "or by jingo, I'll do for you!—I'll cook your goose in a jiffey!"

Thus speaking, he at the same instant snatched up an old rusty sword which lay upon a shelf close at hand, and which was supposed to have been the one wielded by Edward the First at the Battle of Falkirk:—or at least, such was the assurance given some time ago by Mr. Bealby when he sold the curious weapon to its present owner.

"What would you do, unhappy man?" asked Fossilton, trembling with mingled alarm and horror. "You would not murder me? No—no—you—you—you—would not mur—ur—ur—der me?"

"No, not if you keep quiet!" responded the Burker. "I'm as innocent as a young lambkin which skips in the fields when folks let me alone."

"But *who* are you? what does all this mean?" asked the bewildered Fossilton. "You are dressed like a Lascar—but you speak English—if not exactly with the purity of Bunyan's style, at all events with a certain facility——"

"Leave Corn and Bunion to theirselves," said the Burker: "and now just listen to me. There! you'd better sit down again, sir—you're all over in a tremble and quiver—and shivery shakey like—come, sit down, I say—d'ye hear? It's no use your keeping near this door."

"Well, well—what do you want? who are you? and what does all this mean?" inquired the archæologist, whose mingled bewilderment, terror and dismay defy all power of description.

"Now there's no use in shuffling about with the question," said the miscreant: and planting himself opposite the miserable archæologist, who had again sank down into a chair, he added in a cool independent manner, "I suppose you've heerd tell of one Mr. Barnes, better knowd as the Burker?"

"Good heavens! the murderer?" ejaculated Fossilton faintly.

"Well—you may call him *that* if you like," proceeded the ruffian: "but here he stands in his own precious identity afore you. Not another word, old genelman!—dare to cry out, and I split your head open! There now! be quiet, like a good old man—and no harm will happen. I'm going to take my leave of you in a few minutes; and I don't think the parting will be werry distressing for either of us."

Mr. Fossilton looked as if he entertained precisely the same view, and as if the speedier the separation took place, the better he should be pleased.

"Now you see, my fine old feller," continued Barnes, "it won't do for you to say a single word about this here business: 'cos why, if you gives information, and if I'm took on account of it, I shall werry coolly say that you was in the trick with Bealby to get me out of my trouble, but that you arterwards turned round upon me, 'cos why I didn't come up to the mark in the cash department."

"Good heavens! what a distressing position for a man like me to be placed in!" moaned the miserable archæologist, giving way to his lamentations. "Miserable position! miserable, miserable!"

"Not a bit on't!" replied the Burker. "All you've got to do is to hold your tongue—and nobody will be the wiser."

"Well—I won't say a word—don't be afraid—but for heaven's sake go!" said Mr. Fossilton imploringly "Go! and I will forget that you have ever been here—that I have ever seen you. But if this isn't the last time that I bargain for mummies——"

"To be sure! You'll know a trick worth two of that," ejaculated the Burker, with a chuckling laugh. "Now just let me sit down and write a bit of a note—and then I'll take myself off."

The miserable archæologist pointed to a table on which there were writing materials: the Burker coolly seated himself, and proceeded to commit a few lines to paper. Though the billet was short, yet the process of writing it was somewhat a tedious one, inasmuch as Barney was a very indifferent penman; and thus, during the ten minutes he was engaged with his correspondence, Mr. Fossilton sate in a perfect agony of dread and horror. To be there with a murderer—there with one who might suddenly turn round and murder him—the thought was hideous! The poor archæologist's brain was in a perfect whirl; and he bitterly repented his dealings with Mr. Bealby. But the Burker really had no intention of harming the old man: he saw that it was easy to intimidate him, and that the effect of this intimidation would not speedily wear off.

The note was concluded: it was folded up—sealed—and duly addressed to the personage for whom it was intended; and the Burker secured it about his person. Then rising from his seat, he surveyed himself in a looking-glass; and he felt convinced that his present disguise of a Lascar was, if anything, more perfect than even that of a Jew which he had so recently worn.

"Now, you understand, old genelman," he said, turning towards the archæologist, "the conditions on which we separate. You hold your tongue about me—and I shall hold my tongue about you. But if so be you take any step to put the police on my track, I'll tell such a pack of lies when brought up before the beak, as shall get you lagged—that's transported, I mean——for harbouring a chap in my position. So now you know. Is it a bargain—or is it not?"

"It is! it is!" replied the trembling archæologist. "Heaven knows I want to wash my hands of this business! There, there, my good man——not my good man——my man, I mean ——anything you like to call yourself——there's a five pound note for you——and pray take yourself off!"

"Thank'ee kindly, sir," responded the Burker, who beheld in this little incident an additional proof of Mr. Fossilton's utter timidity and of his anxiety to hush up the matter as soon as possible. "Good bye, sir."

Thereupon the Burker unlocked the door, issued from the room, let himself out by the side entrance, and gained the street.

CHAPTER CXIX.

RESPECTABILITY.

THE scene now shifts to a very elegant suburban residence on Brixton Hill. It was a villa—not very spacious, but genteel in its exterior—commodious and beautifully appointed internally. It stood in the midst of a well laid-out garden, in which there were hot-houses and conservatories: while the occupation of a groom who was engaged in washing a handsome carriage of the description known as a clarence, seemed to proclaim that the occupant of the villa must be in very easy circumstances. And such was the case: for this beautiful suburban residence was the one to which Madame Angelique had retired about a week back, after having broken up her establishment in one of the fashionable quarters of London.

It was about the hour of noon—and Madame Angelique was reclining upon the sofa in a beautifully furnished parlour, with a number of French newspapers and Fashion-books scattered around her. She was dressed in an elegant dishabillée, which however would have rather become a young lady of between twenty and thirty than an elderly dame of about fifty. But then she wore it with such an exquisite Parisian coquetry—and the beautiful French cap so completely concealed the false front which Madame Angelique wore—the rouge and the pearl-powder, too, were so artistically laid on—the brilliant set of teeth looked so perfectly natural, and did such infinite credit to the Parisian dentist who made them,—that Madame Angelique might certainly have passed herself off as being ten years younger than she really was.

A loud knock at the door presently made her lay aside the French Fashion-book which she was reading at the moment: for though she had given up her trade of milliner, together with the more questionable one which she had conjointly carried on,—yet she continued to experience a lively curiosity in everything which regarded the newest modes for ladies' apparel. The window of the parlour in which she was seated, commanded a view of the projecting portico of her villa-residence: so she rose from her seat, and just peeped between the muslin curtains to see who the visitor might be.

"Shadbolt!" she half-ejaculated; and an expression of annoyance flitted over her countenance. "This man will prove an extortioner," she continued, musing to herself: "I see that he will—if I let him. But I must extricate myself from his clutches. Nevertheless, the fellow has hitherto been useful——"

At this moment the parlour door was thrown open; and a neatly attired, coquetish-looking female-servant, with very pretty features, duly announced Mr. Shadbolt. This individual was dressed in what both himself and his tailor meant to be the very extreme of fashion: but the natural vulgarity of the man marred all the effect which exquisitely cut garments would otherwise have produced. He wore a profusion of jewellery: indeed it would seem as if he had studied every possible means of crowding gold chains and other trinkets about his person. He affected a half-rakish, half-jaunty air, as if he were perfectly satisfied with the style in which he was thus playing—or shall we say *aping* the West End gentleman?

"Well, my dear madam," he said, throwing himself upon the sofa, near the retired milliner, "how do you get on in your new abode?"

"Having only been here a few days," responded Madame Angelique, "I cannot as yet say much about it: but I have every reason to believe that I shall like it."

"Well, I think I am a little too early for lunch," said Mr. Shadbolt, taking a gold watch from his pocket: "so we will have a little chat upon business before the tray is brought up."

"What business can you have to talk to me upon?" inquired Madame Angelique. "Now that those girls are fully disposed of——"

"Ah! was not all that capitally managed?" ejaculated Shadbolt, with a loud hilarious laugh. "That was my idea—and it was I also who found Cartwright to carry out the business."

"Yes—there is no denying that the affair was capitally managed," said Madame Angelique. "But——"

"Ah! Cartwright is a clever fellow—is he not?" proceeded the visitor. "In some respects he beats honest Ike Shadbolt. Only think of that young fool Augustus Softly marrying Armantine, and being so eager to display the certificate to Cartwright the next time he called——"

"Well, Armantine is excellently provided for—at least for the present," observed Madame Angelique. "She will of course ruin Softly in process of time——"

"Oh! that's a matter of course!" ejaculated Shadbolt, with another hilarious laugh. "But I'm sure I don't know which to admire most,—the way in which Cartwright managed with that fool Softly in respect to Armantine—or the manner in which he dealt with old Lord Wenham in respect to Eglantine. At all events we have done well for the two girls. Armantine is married to an Honourable—Eglantine to a Lord. And as for Linda—she is happy enough with Cartwright himself. Ah! but you should have seen that miserable fellow Choker's countenance when I personated Mr. Downy of the firm of Catchflat, Sharply, Rumrig, and Co.——"

"I have no doubt of it," said Madame Angelique, rather impatiently: "but we have discussed all these subjects before."

"Yes—and we have divided the spoil too," exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt with a laugh. "I must say that Armantine came down very handsome with five hundred pounds the moment she had married Softly—and Eglantine with five hundred also when she became Lady Wenham. But it was also generous on our part to let Cartwright keep all he got by Linda for himself,—you and me remaining content with five hundred apiece—the very identical sums we got from the girls——I suppose we must now call them the Hon. Mrs. Softly and Lady Wenham. Nothing like speaking respectfully of ladies in high condition!"—and again Mr. Isaac Shadbolt laughed hilariously.

"And you have made a good use of your share of the money, as well as of all the other little emoluments you have derived from your acquaintance with me:"—and as Madame Angelique thus spoke, she slowly surveyed the well-dressed, gembedizened person of Mr. Shadbolt.

"To be sure, to be sure!" said this individual, complacently playing with the watch chain which festooned over his silk waistcoat. "But now to business! It is my intention to make hay while the sun shines—strike while the iron is hot: that is the invariable maxim of honest Ike Shadbolt—and it is one to be followed by all sensible people?"

"What do you mean?" asked Madame Angelique. "Of course you cannot suppose——"

"That I am to prey upon your purse?" interrupted Mr. Shadbolt. "Certainly not! Ah! you see that I understood what was passing in your mind. But come—don't be alarmed!—it is all fair and above-board. Do you not recollect that when you were going to give up the millinery establishment, I said I would put you up to making a little money in other ways——"

"I recollect perfectly," answered Madame Angelique: "but I thought when we had accomplished all those things in respect to Armantine, Eglantine, and Linda——"

"That my inventive genius was exhausted? Nothing of the sort! It only shows how little you really know of honest Ike Shadbolt. Bless you, my dear madam! I am up to a trick or two I can assure you:"—and he winked most knowingly.

"Well, what do you mean?" asked the Frenchwoman impatiently. "I wish you would come to the point."

"During your time," proceeded Mr. Shadbolt,—"I mean while you have been in business, you have been enabled to oblige countless numbers of great and wealthy persons, both male and female. I mean, in plain terms, that many lords, ladies, and gentlefolks, have seen the interior of your private rooms at the fashionable establishment which you have just given up——eh?"

"To be sure," said Madame Angelique. "And what then?—what do you mean me to understand——"

"You shall soon see," continued her visitor; "and then you will form a still higher opinion of your obedient humble servant, Isaac Shadbolt, Esquire. Please to listen attentively. At this fashionable house of your's there have been wives who did not come there to meet their husbands—and there have been unmarried ladies who did not afterwards marry the lovers whom they met there, but who have since been conducted to the altar by credulous ones who little suspected their antecedents. Is not all this true?"

"Very true," responded Madame Angelique. "And now I see what you are driving at——"

"Stop! let me finish, and we will debate upon the subject. You *must* be aware, with a little reflection, that in having accommodated so many different ladies and gentlemen, you established everlasting claims upon their gratitude—and which claims, my dear madam," added Shadbolt significantly, "they will not dare to ignore. I tell you what you must do. Just make out a list of some ten or a dozen of the ladies who are thus indebted to you, so that we may hold a committee of ways and means and vote the amount which each lady is to contribute to our treasury. Then I tell you how we'll manage it. You shall write a sweet pretty little note—pink paper—scented—folded into three-cornered shape—and all that sort of thing; and you will say in each note something to the following effect:—'Madame Angelique, having retired from business, respectfully solicits the earliest convenient settlement of Lady So-and-So's account—474*l.*, as per bill delivered. Madame

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Angelique begs to add that she has placed her outstanding accounts in the hands of Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, who will save her ladyship the trouble of sending to Brixton Hill, by personally waiting on her ladyship at So-and-So Mansion.'—There! what do you think of that?" exclaimed Shadbolt triumphantly.

"None of these ladies owe me anything at all," responded Madame Angelique: "they have all paid me——"

"I know that very well," said Shadbolt; "and you know equally well that it has nothing to do with the case. You write the billets—let me take them—and you will very soon see if in every instance I do not obtain the money. If any indignation is shown, I shall very soon give the fair ones to understand that it is a bribe for your secresy in respect to their former doings at your house. In short, it is a genteel and pleasant little mode of extortion which they cannot possibly resist."

Madame Angelique reflected for some moments; and then she said, "I would rather not do it—much rather not."

"Oh, I understand!" cried her visitor petulantly; "you have not sufficient confidence in honest Ike Shadbolt? you think that when I once get hold of the money, I shall use the last syllable of my name—which means *bolt*. But there's nothing of the sort to be feared. Honour amongst ——ahem! I mean honour betwixt Madame Angelique and honest Ike Shadbolt."

"Still I would rather not," answered the retired milliner.

"How ridiculous!" ejaculated Shadbolt. "You know that you can trust me. Besides, give me one little billet at a time; and as I bring back the cash to be divided, you can give me another."

"You do not understand my objection," said Madame Angelique. "The truth is that my late business was nearly getting me into such serious trouble—as no one better knows than yourself—that when I settled down here at this villa, I made up my mind to lead a quiet life and avoid everything that could possibly involve me in difficulties for the future."

"But there is no chance of trouble in what I I propose," persisted Shadbolt. "The proceeding——"

"It is extortion—or attempted extortion—or whatever the English laws calls it," observed Madame Angelique.

"Not a bit of it! Suppose, for instance, a lady defies you—takes the high ground—says that she owes you nothing—that she can produce your receipts—and that she does not understand the nature of the threats held out through me? Well, if we really see that the game can't be played in that quarter, an apology must be made. 'Madame Angelique presents her compliments to Lady So-and-So, and deeply regrets that a mistake should have been made in respect to her ladyship's account, which was entirely owing to an erroneous entry in Madame Angelique's books; but which is now completely rectified.'—What can be better than that?"

"This does indeed look feasible," said Madame Angelique: "but I will think over it——there is no hurry for a day or two——I will let you know."

"Good!" said Shadbolt. "There is, as you say, no hurry in the matter. And now I'll ring for lunch."

With that free-and-easy, independent manner which characterized him, Mr. Isaac Shadbolt pulled the bell; and when the pretty maid-servant answered the summons, he said, "Your mistress wants you to bring up lunch, my dear."

"Yes, sir:"—and the girl was about to retire.

"Stop one moment!" exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt. "Bring up everything cold there is in the larder, so that I can take my choice——and some bottled stout—port and sherry, of course——and I don't mind having a glass or two of that fine old Madeira——"

"Bring up the tray, Jane, as usual," said Madame Angelique, thus addressing herself to the servant and cutting short her visitor's multifarious orders. "Mr. Shadbolt," she continued, when the maid-servant had withdrawn, "I must beg of you to let me be the mistress of my own house. You are very welcome to visit me—and if we enter into that business of which we were just now talking, it will be necessary that you should call frequently. But you must not usurp an authority within these walls—you would compromise me seriously. Pray bear in mind that I have got an entirely new set of servants——none of those that I had at the other establishmeut. All they know of me is that I am Madame Angelique, the fashionable milliner, who has retired from business on a fortune——"

"And quite enough for them to know! Depend upon it, my dear madam, you shall never be compromised by honest Ike Shadbolt."

"I hope not," responded the Frenchwoman emphatically. "There is not a soul in the neighbourhood who suspects that there was anything wrong in that establishment of mine: the clergyman has already left his card—two or three good families have likewise called——"

"Then you will be giving a party soon," exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt: "and I shall be master of the ceremonies. By the bye, that is an uncommon pretty girl—the parlour-maid, I mean——"

"I hope you will not speak to her familiarly, nor look at her insolently," said Madame Angelique, with grave and serious demeanour.

"No, no, my dear madam!" responded Shadbolt. "I do not forget that you have grown respectable. Ah! it's a capital thing to become respectable—and settle down in a respectable neighbourhood—and be visited by respectable families—and go to the Protestant Church or the Catholic Chapel in a respectable way on Sundays ——Ah, by the bye! if I were you, my dear madam, I would come the church-dodge: there's nothing like the church-dodge. Be sure to hire a pew—go to church regularly: and if you can snivel a little bit in the middle of the sermon—of course choosing the proper part—your respectability is established."

Madame Angelique could not help smiling at this tirade into which Mr. Isaac Shadbolt launched forth; and she said, "Well then, if you are so very anxious that I should keep myself respectable, pray do your best to keep up my respectability. Don't call the servant-girl *my dear*——"

"Nor yet chuck her under the chin," added Mr. Shadbolt.

"You don't mean to say you've done it?" cried the Frenchwoman in alarm.

"Done it? Oh, dear me, no! not for the world! Besides, the girl is too ready with her hand in slapping one's face——"

"Then you *have* taken liberties with her!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Now really this is too bad——"

"Pray don't entertain such an evil opinion of your devoted friend honest Ike Shadbolt. I only meant that she looks like a girl who *would* slap a fellow's face——But hush! mum!—here she is!"

The lunch was accordingly brought in; and it was now quite edifying to observe the curious manner in which Mr. Shadbolt endeavoured to look grave, serious, and well-conducted—pursing up his mouth, and only furtively leering from the corner of his eyes at Madame Angelique and Jane to mark the effect which he produced. When the pretty maid-servant had retired, he indemnified himself for three minutes' seriousness by five minutes' laughter; and then he began to pay his respects to the cold chicken, the ham, and the Madeira.

"Talking about respectability," continued Mr. Shadbolt, "I highly approve of your determination to maintain that respectability here. People in a certain class of life can't get on without it. Take your grocer, for instance, who all the week has been selling sugar mixed with sand, sloe leaves for tea, chichory for coffee, turmeric for mustard, ground bones for arrow-root, and every other kind of abomination: but he goes to church on Sunday, and is, of course, a most respectable man. It is the same with everything else——"

"No doubt," said Madame Angelique, again smiling.

"But I tell you what I should advise you to do," resumed Shadbolt. "Just send a twenty pound note to some Missionary Society—that one of Choker's, for instance——"

"No—I am not quite such a fool as all that," replied Madame Angelique. "I think I shall establish my respectability in this neighbourhood on a very sure basis without any such ridiculous proceeding. By the bye, I was going to ask you——"

"Ask me anything, my dear madam," interjected Shadbolt, "except to give up this bottle of Madeira until I have sent the last glass of it down my throat."

"I was going to ask you who that Captain Cartwright really is, that you introduced to me, and who managed those affairs so admirably?"

"He really was once a Captain in the army," replied Shadbolt: "but he sold out and ran through all his money. Then he became a regular man upon the town—living on his wits—until a few years ago, when he visited Paris; and there he got in gaol for debt. Afterwards he returned to London, and became a secret spy of the Home Office."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "A spy of the English Home Office?" she cried incredulously.

"Yes, to be sure," responded Shadbolt. "If you ever read the newspapers, you will see that every year twenty or thirty thousand pounds—I forget exactly how much—are voted for what is called Secret Service Money: and what do you think secret service money is for except for the employment of spies and all that sort of thing? Why, there's never a political meeting held by the working-classes but what the secret spies of government are present; and when anything very strong or very seditious is said, the spies always cheer the loudest."

"You astonish me!" said Madame Angelique.

"It's nevertheless a fact," replied Mr. Shadbolt: "and the reason's clear enough. The government likes to give a certain colour to the working-class meetings, because it frightens the middle-classes and makes them stick all the closer to the aristocracy."

"To be sure! *Now* I understand!" said Madame Angelique. "But this Captain Cartwright of whom we were speaking——"

"He got into disgrace somehow or another with the government," continued Shadbolt: "I think it was for not swearing strong enough at a political trial some time back; and so he got his discharge. Then he took to living on his wits again; and so the business we have lately put into his hand has been a splendid windfall for him."

While thus discoursing, the luncheon progressed; and when Madame Angelique had imbibed three or four glasses of the fine old Madeira, she began to feel less antipathy towards Shadbolt than she was wont to experience at times when she was not under any artificial influence. The idea strengthened in her mind that though she already possessed riches, she might as well double their amount; and that as circumstances had thrown in her way so willing an instrument as this man, she might just as well render him still more useful. Accordingly, after having partaken of another glass, Madame Angelique said, "Well, Mr. Shadbolt, everything considered, I mean to adopt the proposal you made to me just now."

"I knew you would," responded this individual, who, during a brief pause in the discourse, had been making immense inroads upon the comestibles as well as upon the fluids. "The sooner we make a beginning, the better."

Madame Angelique reflected for a few minutes; and after enumerating several names in her own mind, she at length stopped at one the recollection of which appeared to give her great satisfaction.

"Yes—this is a sure card," she said, now giving audible expression to her thoughts. "You have nothing to do but present the note, which I will immediately write."

"And who is the lady?" asked Mr. Shadbolt.

Madame Angelique did not respond to the question: but placing herself at a writing-table near the window, she penned a note.

"Now, Mr. Shadbolt," she said, when she had folded, sealed, and addressed the billet; "if you think you are sober enough, after all that wine, to conduct the business properly, you may at once set about making your first experiment. Balham Hill is at no great distance: you can find some vehicle to take you thither——"

"I will proceed on this mission at once," exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt, who was eager to begin. "As for being sober enough, the more I drink the better fitted I am for business."

Thus speaking, he received the note from the Frenchwoman's hand; and surveyed the address.

"Lady Anastatia Latham," said Mr. Shadbolt

examining the note with a critical eye. "Very prettily written—accurately folded—the paper of a neat pale pink—the seal delicate and well formed—just such a billet as is worthy to be borne by so polished a gentleman as honest Ike Shadbolt."

With these words he stuck his hat airily and jauntily upon one side of his head; and pausing at the luncheon-table for a few moments to toss off another glass of wine, he took his departure.

Madame Angelique resumed her reading of the French papers and fashion-books for some little while, until she thought it time to ascend to her dressing-room and perform her toilet: for she was as yet in deshabillée. In the meanwhile the carriage was ordered to be gotten in readiness to take her out for a drive: but it occurred that when she herself was dressed, the equipage was not quite prepared for her reception. Madame Angelique accordingly strolled in the little garden which separated the villa from the main road; and as she was passing by the gate, she perceived a person whom she took to be a poor Lascar sailor, walking slowly along. Just at that instant an open carriage, filled with ladies, was approaching from a short distance; and Madame Angelique's quick eye at once recognised them as a genteel family dwelling in the neighbourhood, and who occupied the pew next to her own at church. But this family had not called upon Madame Angelique; and the ex-milliner was very anxious to win their good opinions. Here therefore was an opportunity to display her charity: here was an occasion to prove that if she possessed wealth she knew how to use it for the relief of her suffering fellow-creatures. Pausing at the gate, she beckoned the Lascar to approach,—at the same time that she drew forth her purse.

"You seem to be suffering very much from fatigue, my poor man," she said, speaking in English, and holding a half-crown over the gate at the very instant that the carriage with the ladies rolled past.

The Lascar only shook his head—but said nothing. Madame Angelique then addressed him in French: but still no reply—and only a shake of the head. She gave him the money: but as he took it, it struck her that a more savage, sinister-looking rascal she had not seen for a very long time. He made an awkward bow, and continued his way. Madame Angelique's carriage was now in readiness; and she rode forth for her airing. She had not proceeded very far when a gentleman on horseback rode hastily past the carriage, proceeding in the same direction which the equipage itself was taking. The ex-milliner at once recognised the Duke of Marchmont, though it did not seem as if the nobleman himself was aware whose dashing turn-out he was thus passing. He was unattended by any groom; and Madame Angelique said to herself, "His Grace is bent on some mischief, I'll be bound!—or else he would not be thus alone. Doubtless he is after some fair one? Ah, he will miss my assistance and intervention in such matters—as will a great many other persons likewise!"

The carriage having proceeded for about three miles along the main road, turned into a lane, so that by a circuitous route it might regain the villa,—thereby diversifying the excursion, and enabling Madame Angelique to enjoy the freshness of the breeze that was wafted through the foliage of the shady lanes along which the equipage was now proceeding. All of a sudden the carriage passed a spot where Madame Angelique caught sight of the Lascar whom she had relieved, and who was now talking to a gentleman on horseback. This horseman she also recognised:—he was the Duke of Marchmont.

The ex-milliner was struck by the singularity of the circumstance. Neither the Lascar nor the Duke had recognised herself as the equipage swept by; and she had distinctly heard the Lascar speaking at the moment—though what he was saying she could not distinguish. To herself he had been unable—or at least had affected to be unable to speak either English or French: whereas with the Duke of Marchmont he was now in discourse. And then too, could it be possible that the Duke was merely inspired by charitable motives to stop and talk to the man?—was he after all riding about that neighbourhood for his pleasure, without any settled purpose?—and was the meeting with this Lascar as purely accidental, as casual, and as aimless, as it might have been with any other beggar. No: Madame Angelique was perfectly convinced that such was *not* the case. What, then, could it all mean? She was bewildered—she was lost in conjecture: her curiosity was excited—but she had no means of gratifying it.

It was verging towards five o'clock when this little incident took place: the drive was nearly at an end—and the villa was at no great distance. The equipage was nearing the point where the lane turned into the main road,—when the sounds of a galloping horse were heard; and in a few moments a riderless steed swept past. It came from behind—therefore from the same direction where the Duke and the Lascar had been seen together: and what was more, Madame Angelique felt convinced that it was his Grace's horse which she had just beheld.

The carriage stopped—the footman leaped down from his seat next to the coachman—and coming up to the window, he said, "I fear, ma'am, there's been some accident. It strikes me it was the horse of that gentleman whom we saw in the lane——"

"The very same idea struck me!" said the ex-milliner. "Let us go back as quick as possible!—the unfortunate gentleman may have been thrown!"

Madame Angelique—being impressed with the conviction that the Duke of Marchmont was engaged in some private business, most probably of a character which he would rather not have pryed and penetrated into—had forborne from mentioning his rank and her own knowledge of who he was. The equipage had to pass out into the road before it could turn to retrace its way along the lane; and this caused some little delay. But presently it was returning in the direction whence it had previously come: while Madame Angelique from the windows, and the servants from the box, were looking out in expectation of beholding the thrown horseman. On went the equipage,—until at length ejaculations burst from the lips of the domestics on the box; and in a few moments the carriage stopped at the very place where the ex-milliner remembered to have seen the Duke and the Lascar talking together.

And there lay the Duke of Marchmont, stretched upon the ground, close by a gate against which the Lascar was leaning when seen in discourse with his lordship. Down sprang the servants from the box; and the ex-milliner alighted from the carriage. The Duke was found to be insensible: indeed at first they thought he was dead: but in a few minutes they ascertained that he was merely stunned.

"This looks uncommon like a violent blow, dealt with a bludgeon," said the footman, directing attention to the marks of a severe contusion upon the temple.

"There's no doubt of it!" said the coachman. "That Lascar scoundrel must have knocked the poor gentleman from his horse: because this is the very spot where we saw them talking just now—and it isn't to be supposed that the horse threw the gentleman off all of a sudden before he had moved an inch away from the place."

"Convey him into the carriage," said Madame Angelique: "we have no means of restoring him here—we will take him to the villa."

"And what about that rascally Lascar, ma'am?" inquired the footman.

"What *can* be done?" said Madame Angelique. "The fellow is doubtless at some distance by this time——Besides, our first consideration is for this gentleman——"

"He looks a person of distinction," observed the footman, as he assisted the coachman to convey the inanimate form of the Duke into the carriage.

"Now make haste home!" said Madame Angelique, as she settled herself inside in such a way as to sustain the head of the unconscious Marchmont.

The domestics sprang up to the box; and the lane happened fortunately to be at this part wide enough for the equipage to turn. It proceeded rapidly along towards the villa; and in the meanwhile Madame Angelique did her best to recover the Duke by fanning his countenance with her kerchief. His chest began to heave—slowly at first—then with more rapidly consecutive convulsions: his painful gaspings appeared to be bringing back the vital breath, and setting the respiratory functions to work. He opened his eyes for a moment—but closed them again,—evidently without having comprehended where he was, nor who was with him.

In a few minutes his lips began to waver; and he murmured some words. They were incoherent, save and except in reference to *one* word—and that was a name—the name of his long-lost brother Bertram! Madame Angelique listened with the suspenseful curiosity of one who expected to hear something more, and who had a sort of vague presentiment that it would be of importance,—though without at all anticipating what its nature might be, or why she should have that impression. Her eyes were intently fixed upon the Duke's countenance—which was very pale. His own eyes were closed: the mark of the contusion, and of abrasion likewise, was now more plainly visible than at first: it was evidently the result of a very fierce and savage blow which had deprived the Duke of consciousness—and most probably, as the domestics had surmised, knocked him from his horse.

Again was there a wavering of the lips: again did he give utterance to some words; and though his speech continued incoherent, yet were the words themselves audible as well as intelligible. Madame Angelique started: feelings of mingled wonderment, dismay, and horror seized upon her; and the very expression which they gave to her countenance, suddenly congealed as it were there,—remaining fixed and rigid upon her features. Her breath was suspended as she continued to listen with the profoundest, awfullest interest.

Again the Duke spoke,—his frame now writhing with the pangs which frequently accompany returning consciousness after a state of insensibility; and at the same time too it appeared as if these physical pains engendered mental ones, blending therewith in a strong convulsing agony. Under these joint influences did the Duke continue speaking—incoherently, but distinctly audible: and with increasing astoundment did Madame Angelique listen.

The end of the lane was now reached; and there it appeared that some man who was passing had caught the riderless horse. The footman from the box shouted forth instructions as to whither the man was to lead the animal; and the equipage continued its way. The Duke was now rapidly recovering; and by the time the carriage reached the villa, he was sitting up, endeavouring to gather his recollections—and endeavouring also to comprehend what was being said to him by Madame Angelique, whom as yet however he did not completely recognise.

Though the ex-milliner had now regained her perfect self-possession,—yet if the Duke were completely sensible, he could not have failed to perceive that there was a sense of appalling wonderment in her soul—visible even beneath the gloss of composure which she now wore. She had learnt a tremendous secret; and she was studying to have the appearance of one whose mind had not been disturbed beyond the excitement which might naturally be supposed to have arisen from the adventure itself. Just as the carriage drove up to the front door of the villa, the Duke recognised who his companion was; and this recognition seemed to give a sudden impulse to his intellect generally.

He was assisted from the equipage; and leaning on the footman's arm, he walked into the parlour. The man who had caught his horse was dismissed by Madame Angelique with a liberal gratuity: and the animal itself was consigned to the stable. The Duke was deposited upon a sofa: some refreshing beverage was administered; and as he was now completely sensible, Madame Angelique gave him to understand—without being observed by the domestics present—that his name and rank need not be revealed unless he thought fit. He made a sign to the effect that it would be better to observe caution on the point; and Madame Angelique soon found an opportunity of dismissing the footman and Jane from the apartment, on the plea that the gentleman was rapidly recovering.

The ex-milliner and the Duke were now alone together. The former explained how she herself had relieved the Lascar, who most unaccountably affected to be unable to comprehend her—how she had seen that man and the Duke in conversation together—and how the spectacle of the riderless horse had induced her to turn back towards the

spot where Marchmont had been discovered in a senseless condition. But Madame Angelique made not the slightest allusion to the words which the Duke had so unconsciously spoken in the carriage, when gradually arousing from a state of insensibility.

"The fact is," said the Duke, after he had expressed his thanks to the ex-milliner for all her kindness, as well as for the prudential caution which she had used in respect to his name, "I took out my purse to give that ruffian relief—in the twinkling of an eye did he knock me from my horse—I remembered nothing more until I found myself seated by your side in the carriage. My purse, my watch, my rings are gone——"

"I felt assured you had been robbed," said Madame Angelique, "when in the carriage I noticed that there was not any jewellery about your person. But tell me, my lord—was there not something strange about that man — that villanous-looking Lascar?"

"There might be," said the Duke dryly. "You have a beautiful place here——I intended to come and call upon you —— I did not exactly know where your habitation was situated—and little did I suspect just now that I was passing my old friend Madame Angelique's carriage," added his Grace, with a familiar smile.

The ex-milliner saw that the Duke did not wish to be questioned in respect to the Lascar, and she therefore said not another word upon the subject. There were other topics which she also avoided—although she might have touched upon them; for the presence of the Duke had conjured them up to her memory. She might have intimated her suspicion that he was not altogether a stranger to the murderous attempt on the life of Sagoonah at Bayswater: but Madame Angelique beheld no utility in discussing such matters; and moreover she had hoped, when retiring from her own equivocal avocations, that she might entirely wash her hands of all the perilous intrigues and machinations into which she had at one time been led by the Duke of Marchmont.

"I do not wish this little affair to become bruited abroad," said his Grace, thus alluding to his adventure with the ferocious Lascar. "It is troublesome to have the police set to work—and all that sort of thing."

"Nothing need transpire," answered Madame Angelique: "I will tell my domestics that you are a Mr. Cavendish—or Fitzherbert—or some other fashionable name—and that as you are immediately going on the Continent, you do not think it worth while to delay your departure for the purpose of causing a pursuit, which perhaps may prove ineffectual, to be instituted after the ruffian Lascar."

The Duke thanked Madame Angelique for her readiness in managing the matter according to his inclination; and under the name of Mr. Cavendish he remained to dine with her. By about nine o'clock in the evening his Grace was so perfectly recovered as to be enabled to mount his horse and ride home to Belgrave Square.

CHAPTER CXX.

THE LATHAMS.

THE scene of this narrative shifts to a large and very handsome suburban mansion, situated at Balham Hill. This thriving district, in a convenient vicinage of the metropolis, promises to become completely fashionable, and to acquire a reputation on that score equal to Clapham.

Tudor House — the mansion of which we are speaking—was situated in the midst of spacious grounds, which had however been too recently laid out for perfect beauty, but which were nevertheless sufficiently attractive. Indeed, it was quite evident that no expense had been spared upon either the mansion or the grounds, by Sir Frederick Latham, the owner of the property. This gentleman was about fifty years of age—a partner in one of the most eminent mercantile firms in the City of London; and he was exceedingly rich. The house to which he belonged had enjoyed opportunities of rendering, at various times, financial services to the Government; and thus, while a Peerage was conferred upon the senior partner, a Baronetcy was bestowed upon the second. This was how Sir Frederick Latham obtained the title which he now possessed.

He had somewhat recently married the daughter of a noble but impoverished family,—a Lady in her own right: and thus his wife enjoyed the privilege of prefixing her Christian to her surname on all occasions—which will account for the fact of her being styled Lady Anastatia Latham. She was about one-and-twenty years of age and very beautiful. It was not however beauty alone which characterized her: there was something singularly interesting in the expression of her countenance as well as softly winning and unstudiously fascinating in her manners. Her features were regular, her nose being perfectly straight, the forehead not too high to be dissimilar from the style of beauty defined by the Grecian statues; while her brows were superbly arched and well divided: thus giving an open frankness to the whole countenance. Her eyes were large and of a deep blue, full of a soft lustre, which seldom indeed concentrated itself in the lightning-flash of strong passion, but shining with that serene steadiness and evenness which seemed to indicate the goodness, and gentleness, and benevolence of her disposition. About the mouth there was a singular beauty, not merely in its chiselling but also in its expression. Its formation was purely classical in respect to the upper lip, which was arched like Cupid's bow: the under lip was fuller and richer, but without conveying the slightest impression of sensuousness on the part of Anastatia. Her hair was of a rich brown; and of such luxuriance was it—with so superb a gloss too resting upon the surface—that it was no wonder if she generally wore it without any ornaments either of gems or flowers, but as if conscious that it became her best in the unadorned wealth of its own natural loveliness. In heavy tresses and in massive clusters did it float upon her shoulders, and form as it were a background for a neck of dazzling whiteness: for Anastatia's complexion was sweetly pure and transparent. She was tall and well-formed,—the contours of the Hebe combining with

the slender graces of the sylph to constitute the perfection of her shape. In her toilet she was simple and modest—never seeking by means of low-bodied dresses for a meretricious display of her charms, nor caring much to avail herself of the sumptuous presents of gems and jewellery made by her husband for the embellishment of her person.

Such was Anastatia Latham; and we must now say a few words in respect to her husband. Sir Frederick was a tall man—somewhat inclined to stoutness, without being actually corpulent: he was perfectly upright, and carried himself with a certain stiffness,—which, together with his general appearance, impressed every one with the sense of cold formality on his part. Handsome he certainly was not: but he was equally far from being ill-favoured. His features were large: his forehead, exceedingly high and massive, gradually rounded off into the crown of the head, all the front of which was bald. Thus his iron-grey hair being worn away from that part, gave him a certain dignity of appearance, which by his manner he evidently strove to sustain. His blue eyes were of that cold expression which denotes calculating, business-habits: they moved steadily in their orbits—never turning nor flashing restlessly. There was something severe too in the expression of his thin lips, which if not actually compressed, were generally retained close and immovable—except of course when he was speaking. To look at him no one would give Sir Frederick Latham credit for genius, nor even talent: but at the same time there was a vast amount of worldly knowledge evidenced in the expression of that countenance. No designing man possessed of the least discrimination, would think of selecting Sir Frederick as his victim: wariness, shrewdness, and extreme caution were displayed in his looks as well as in his speech. Without knowing who he was, a stranger would say, "That is a man who never does anything inconsiderately, but who coldly and dispassionately weighs every proposal that may be submitted to him."

Sir Frederick was rich and exceedingly fond of money,—not however for the purpose of hoarding it, much less of spending it extravagantly—but to enjoy it according to the common notions of that enjoyment which money can procure. He lived handsomely—kept fine equipages—gave sumptuous entertainments; but nevertheless was always careful to assure himself that he was not merely living strictly within his income, but that he would have a large surplus at the end of each year. As he had risen from comparatively nothing, he was proud of his position. He scorned all civic honours, and sought to draw himself nearer towards the Aristocracy of the country. He would not have accepted the post of Lord Mayor of London for a single hour: but in his heart he was infinitely elated, though outwardly he showed it not, when he was created a Baronet. He would have held it as a positive degradation to become an Alderman of London: but he was flattered and gratified when placed in the commission of the peace for the County of Surrey. He was proud of belonging to the great Moneyocracy of England; and if he by shrewd and cautious steps strove to introduce himself more and more into the region of the Birth Aristocracy, he never fawned upon a lord—never played the sycophant—never forced himself unasked upon the society of great personages. Wherever he went in that patrician sphere, his demeanour indicated the calm self-possession of one who felt that he was by no means out of place, and that he was receiving no favour by being invited there.

Coldly calculating as Sir Frederick Latham was—endowed with common sense and worldly knowledge in the most accurate meaning of those terms—it may be a matter of surprise to the reader that after having remained so long unmarried, he should at length have conducted to the altar a lady who was young enough to be his daughter. On the other hand—considering Anastatia's exceeding beauty, her youth, and her accomplishments, her fascinating manners and her patrician birth—it may be also a matter of marvel that she should have failed to captivate any wealthy suitor in her own sphere. The dowerless daughter of an Earl and Countess—who, partly from extravagance and partly from the depreciation of property in the West Indies, where they had large estates, had barely enough to maintain themselves,—Lady Anastatia's position was one which had rendered fortune indispensable on the part of whomsoever she might accompany to the altar. Still there was many a rich scion of the aristocracy who might perchance have sought to wed a young lady in every way his equal except on the score of riches: but to the astonishment of everybody the fashionable newspapers one day announced that "Sir Frederick Latham, partner in one of the most eminent city mercantile firms, was about to conduct to the hymeneal altar the young, lovely, and accomplished daughter of the Earl and Countess of Fordwich."

And the marriage took place: nor on the wedding-day did there seem on Anastatia's part to be any particular sense of self-sacrifice—no mortification of efforts being made to crush other affections which her young heart might possibly have formed. Her demeanour was serene; and those who knew her best, declared that there could be no dissimulation on her part—for that it was impossible the soul of one so pure could be infected with hypocrisy or guile. There were not however wanting at the time certain busy tongues to whisper that Sir Frederick Latham had rendered great pecuniary assistance to the Fordwich family, especially to Anastatia's only brother, Viscount Rushbrook, the heir to the Earldom. But on this point nothing was certain: that is to say, no positive details could be relied upon—though, as a matter of course, it was patent to everybody that the marriage was one of expediency on the part of Anastatia's family,—the great wealth of Sir Frederick Latham being the idol on whose altar the young lady was sacrificed—though she herself might possibly feel that it was no sacrifice at all.

This marriage had taken place about two years previous to the time of which we are writing. Sir Frederick was then building his palatial mansion at Balham Hill; and it was not finished until the lapse of some months after the solemnization of those nuptials. But when completed, Sir Frederick and his wife removed to their new home, where they had since maintained a sumptuous establishment. The aristocratic marriage which Sir Frederick had contracted, fulfilled the darling hope

which he constantly though secretly cherished: namely, of introducing him thoroughly, and without any more cautious and guarded efforts, into the very best society. This was the real secret of the marriage so far as he himself was concerned —though the world suspected it not, because he had ever managed to conceal that *one* weakness which he possessed—we mean the yearning after patrician acquaintances. But as for his espousing so young a creature,—in the first place, the opportunity presented itself, and he had seized upon it. Secondly, his moneycratic pride had made him calculate that his wealth was a fair set-off against Lady Anastatia's high birth—and that in return for the riches he could give, the borrowed lustre of her rank was a fair compensation. And then again, no matter how shrewd a man may be in every other sort of calculation, yet in respect to matrimony he never thinks himself too old for a wife, however youthful: his vanity will not permit him to recognise the disparity which others see: he flatters himself that he possesses every quality to command respect and secure esteem. Perhaps in reference to love, a person of Sir Frederick Latham's disposition might have treated the idea somewhat scornfully,—looking upon it as a mere piece of romance—well enough for schoolboys and puling misses to read about—but existing as nothing which ought to enter into those calculations whereupon matrimony is based.

Two years of wedded life had Anastatia thus experienced; and her lot did not appear to be an unhappy one. Those who had known her from her childhood, even went so far as to declare that she was perfectly happy. Very certain it was that she presided with the utmost amiability, as well as with cheerfulness, over the sumptuous entertainments which were so frequently given at Tudor House. There was always that interesting sweetness about her which, by a little stretch of sentimentalism, might be taken for an habitual pensiveness, serene without being melancholy; and thus perhaps it was quite natural for some to suppose that she had either courageously or else meekly resigned herself to the lot which destiny, operating through the medium of family circumstances and her parents' will, had provided for her.

There was no issue from this union; and Sir Frederick Latham was never heard to express a regret that he had no heir to his title and property. But because he said nothing, it was no reason that he felt nothing on the subject: he was a man who would never betray any cause of vexation—his pride would not permit him. He suffered himself not to be elated by joy, nor to be depressed by any circumstance calculated to vex or afflict. It was his study ever to maintain that sort of cold equanimity which was habitual to him, and which indeed answered so many purposes, alike in his business pursuits and in his intercourse with friends and acquaintances. Thus, even if he had longed with the deepest, deepest yearning for an heir, the world would not have known it.

We must say a few more words in a descriptive sense before we resume the thread of that episode which we believe will not prove the least interesting in our narrative. The reader will doubtless be anxious to know upon what terms Sir Frederick and his wife lived together. As there was assuredly no love on either side, there was no sentimental display of affection between them. Sir Frederick was as kind as his habits and manner would allow him to be: while Anastatia strove to perform to her utmost all the duties of a wife. There was nothing fond nor caressing, much less playful or uxorious, in Sir Frederick Latham's conduct towards his wife: but on the other hand, the kind courtesy with which he treated her, was never capriciously nor causelessly interrupted. He made her his companion, and in some respects his friend—but not wholly so: for he never spoke to her on business-matters — never gave her the slightest insight into the extent of his wealth—merely proved to her by his deeds that he *was* wealthy, and considered *that* sufficient. In respect to the mansion and the grounds, he certainly consulted her taste at times on a few minor matters—but always in a way that seemed to indicate that his own opinion was already settled on the subject. Nevertheless, if Anastatia happened to express a desire that anything particular should be done, her husband said nothing to her at the time; but the mandate immediately went forth from his lips to those whom it concerned—and the thing *was* done. Towards Sir Frederick, Anastatia was mild and gentle—because this was her nature: she was submissive without being servile—duteous without losing sight of her own proper dignity as a wife. As to the society they kept and the acquaintances they cherished, there could be no possible dispute between them,—inasmuch as none but men of known honour and probity were ever introduced by Sir Frederick, while Lady Anastatia courted only the pure and spotless of her own sex as her companions.

We may now resume the thread of our narrative. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of that day of which we have been writing in the previous chapter; and Lady Anastatia Latham was seated by herself in a splendidly furnished apartment at Tudor House. Some visitresses had just taken their departure: and Anastatia was resuming some elegant fancy-work which she had temporarily laid aside. Presently the door opened; and a footman entered to present a note upon a massive silver salver.

"Please your ladyship," said the footman, "the person who delivered this, says that he will wait for your ladyship's answer."

Anastatia opened the exquisitely folded, perfumed, pink-tinted billet which was thus handed to her; and she found the contents to run as follow:—

"Madame Angelique, having retired from business, respectfully solicits the earliest convenient settlement of Lady Anastatia Latham's account. The sum is 563*l.*, as per bill delivered. Madame Angelique begs to add that she has placed her outstanding accounts in the hands of Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, who is the bearer of this letter, and who will save her ladyship the trouble of sending to Madame Angelique's villa at Brixton Hill, by personally waiting on Lady Anastatia Latham on the earliest convenient day which her ladyship may appoint."

"There must be some mistake here," said Lady Anastatia, from whose cheeks the colour had flitted away for a moment, and to which the next instant it had come back with a deeper dye: yet her voice

was calm as she spoke—and it trembled not in the aintest degree. "Tell this person to step up."

The lacquey immediately retired; and in a few minutes Mr. Isaac Shadbolt was introduced into the room. In the meanwhile Anastatia had examined some papers in her writing-desk; and thence she had taken forth three or four of those documents.

"You, I presume," said Anastatia, in a calm, lady-like manner, as Mr. Shadbolt advanced into the room, "are the person alluded to in this note?"—and she held up the one she had received.

"Precisely so, my lady," was the response. "I am honest Ike Shadbolt, at your service."

"Then, sir," proceeded Anastatia, in a colder tone and with a more dignified manner—for it struck her that there was a certain approach to familiarity on Shadbolt's part; "I have only to inform you that there is some mistake in the matter, and which you will have the goodness to see rectified. Here are all the bills I ever received from Madame Angelique; and as you will perceive, they are duly receipted. Besides, I was never at any one time indebted to Madame Angelique in half the sum which this note of her's specifies."

"I see the bills, my lady," rejoined Mr. Shadbolt; "and I observe that they are all receipted too. But what is the date of the last?" and he peered impudently forward.

"A year back," said Lady Anastatia, who was evidently making an effort to command and preserve all the patience and civility which she was showing towards the man.

"Well, my lady—but then there's a bill since this last one," said Mr. Shadbolt boldly; "and it's that which——"

"No—you are wrong," rejoined Anastatia; "inasmuch as I have not dealt with Madame Angelique for a year past:"—and there was some-

thing bordering upon a calm, or rather suppressed indignation in the tone and look of the patrician lady.

"Ah, well, ma'am—it's all very fine," ejaculated Shadbolt, "for your ladyship to make this statement: but there is Madame Angelique's counter-statement——"

"I repeat, sir," interrupted Lady Anastatia haughtily, "there is some mistake! I will however look over my accounts, and see whether by any possibility there is one of Madame Angelique's which has remained unpaid. I am however positive that all the bills are here:"—and she indicated the receipted accounts which lay upon the table.

"And I am equally positive, my lady," responded Shadbolt, "that you *do* owe Madame Angelique this money—no matter whether an account has been sent in or not."

Anastatia had already shown more coldness and more hauteur, more indignant impatience and more proud dignity, in the space of a few minutes than she had ever done before: but it was now with the very haughtiest indignation and the very utmost of her indignant pride, that drawing her fine form up to its full height, she bent her beautiful blue eyes upon the intending extortioner,—saying, "This is the first time my word was ever doubted: and your conduct is bordering upon insolence. You can retire, sir. I will myself communicate with Madame Angelique in the course of a day or two."

"Very good, my lady," said Shadbolt, who was more than half inclined to speak with a still greater degree of insolence. "Mind you don't forget."

He then strolled jauntily out of the room; and Anastatia felt so hurt—her feelings were so wounded, her pride was so insulted—that she could scarcely keep back an outburst of tears. Not for a moment did she suspect the real purport of the note and the real object of the visitor—namely, that an extortion was intended: she firmly believed it was all a mistake on Madame Angelique's part, but that the ex-milliner had entrusted her business to a very rude person whose coarse vulgar manners were ill calculated to qualify him for such a mission. A being of Anastatia's natural gentleness and amiability, felt such a scene as this far more than a worldly-minded woman would have done; and the very effort of summoning up her dignity, as well as that unwonted display of indignation, were followed by a reaction, which, as we have just said, almost reduced her to the weakness of tears. Shadbolt had not left the room many moments when Sir Frederick Latham entered.

"I have just received a note from your brother, Anastatia," he said, "in which the Viscount tells me——But you look distressed? Has anything happened to annoy you?"

The question was put merely with that calmly kind courtesy which Sir Frederick was wont to observe towards his wife; and there was perhaps a slight expression of concern on his countenance: but there was no endearment of manner—no caressing encouragement—no solace conveyed in sympathizing anticipation of whatsoever might be told him. Anastatia's grief was now suddenly mingled with confusion: and hastily gathering up the papers which lay upon the table—namely, the receipted bills which she had produced, and Madame Angelique's note which she had received—she swept them all into her desk—at the same time faltering forth, "No, no—nothing has annoyed me!"

"I am glad to hear it," said Sir Frederick Latham: but for a few moments his cold blue eyes were fixed steadily and searchingly upon his wife.

"You have had a letter from my brother?" she said, now partially regaining her self-possession: and at the very instant she raised her own eyes towards her husband's countenance, his looks were withdrawn from her, as if he would not for the world have it supposed that he was in any way surprised or troubled by the confusion of her manner and the singularity of her conduct.

"Yes—I have received a note from Viscount Rushbrook," continued Sir Frederick Latham, the calmness of whose look and manner completely restored Anastatia to her own self-possession. "His lordship announces his intention of coming to dine with us to-day; and as he moreover hints that he has a little private business on which he is desirous to speak to me——"

"I hope—I hope," murmured Anastatia, as if seized with some new cause of vexation, "that my brother Robert——"

"Do not by any means annoy yourself," continued Sir Frederick, in the same calm imperturbable manner as before. "It is not on that account I mentioned the circumstance of his letter. It was simply to learn whether you expect any friends to dine with us to-day——"

"No, Sir Frederick," responded Anastatia. "You are well aware that I never issue invitations without previously consulting your convenience——"

"You are welcome to do so at any time you may think fit," answered Sir Frederick, but more with the air of one who was conveying a permission than who was bidding his wife exercise a right which was indisputably her own. "On my part I have invited no one to dine with us to-day; and therefore it is somewhat fortunate that after dinner I shall be left alone with your brother—— I mean merely because he intimates that he has some business of importance on which to consult me."

"I have not seen Robert for some months past," said Anastatia; "and I hope in the name of heaven——"

"Again I tell you not to distress yourself," interrupted Sir Frederick. "If it is a matter of a little pecuniary assistance, he shall have it. Thank God, Lady Anastatia, your husband is a man who can afford it, without the slightest detriment to his own interests."

"I know you are very rich," said her ladyship: and then, as she looked tearfully up into her husband's countenance, she added, "But it is really too bad of Robert——"

"He exercises the privilege of a brother-in-law," remarked Sir Frederick: and there might perhaps have been a faint—though very faint expression of irony in his tone: but Anastatia perceived it not.

"You have been so good to him—you have done so much," she said,—"and under such fearful circumstances too——"

"Lady Anastatia," interrupted Sir Frederick,

without the slightest change in his tone, look, or manner—but with a sort of calmness, half business-like, half self-complacent,—"I have more than once begged you not to allude to those circumstances. Assuredly, if I had thought that the conversation would have taken this turn, I should not have spoken of that part of your brother's note which hints at important business."

"But whenever my brother's name is mentioned," answered Lady Anastatia, "I am always reminded——yes, necessarily so," she continued with much feeling, "of *your* great goodness and *his* wildness—I may even say his wickedness. Never, never can I forget it! And at the time when our parents would not see him—when he stood upon the very brink of ruin—when a frightful exposure threatened him—when the gulf was about to open at his feet,—you, Sir Frederick, came forward—not ostentatiously, but privately and secretly——"

"Stop, Anastatia!" said the great merchant: "this is sufficient. Let us allude to the topic no more."

If a very acute observer had been present—one intimately acquainted with the ways of the world, and skilled in reading the mysteries of the human heart—he would have been led to suspect, or indeed perhaps he would have plainly seen, that Sir Frederick Latham had suffered his wife to proceed to just that sufficient extent which ministered to his own vanity, and which reminded herself of the great pecuniary obligations under which her family laboured towards him; and that he had then stopped her just at the point where he might seem to have been listening hitherto for courtesy's sake, but beyond which to listen any longer would be perhaps to excite a suspicion as to his real motives. He now gave the conversation a complete turn; and shortly afterwards Lady Anastatia proceeded to her dressing-room to perform her evening toilet.

CHAPTER CXXI.

THE LORD AND THE MERCHANT.

SHORTLY after five o'clock, a very elegant phaeton and pair dashed up to the entrance of Tudor House. This equipage belonged to Viscount Rushbrook; and his lordship himself was driving it,—a groom in an elegant livery being seated by his side. The Viscount was smoking a cigar; and his whole appearance was of that dissipated, rakish, devil-may-care kind which denoted the spendthrift and the improvident one. He was five or six years older than his sister Anastatia: he was tall and well formed; he had dark hair, an aristocratic profile, and good features: but as we have just hinted, the traces of dissipation were upon his countenance. He was moreover thoroughly heartless and unprincipled: he would sacrifice a friend at any moment if it suited his interests, or if his pecuniary wants had to be supplied. He cared not for sister nor for parents: but yet he was an accomplished hypocrite—and at any time, to gain his own ends, could simulate the utmost fraternal love or filial affection. From his very boyhood he had been reckless and extravagant: his proceedings at college had helped to make considerable inroads upon the already dilapidated income of his father the Earl of Fordwich; and it was whispered that on more occasions than one had he since the attainment of his majority been compelled to leave the country for a time until his debts were settled.

Such was Anastatia's brother, Robert Viscount Rushbrook. When the equipage dashed up in grand style to the front of the mansion, the Viscount tossed the reins to his groom on one side—and tossed the cigar from his mouth on the other: he then stood for a few moments to admire his splendid pair of horses, which were steaming on account of the pace at which he had driven them;—and then he sauntered into the house. Proceeding to the drawing-room, he found Sir Frederick and Anastatia there; and as he had a favour to ask of the former, it was his policy to render himself as agreeable as possible.

"How are you, Sir Frederick?" he exclaimed, proffering his hand, and bestowing a very warm shake therewith, although there was nothing cordial nor fervid in the manner of his brother-in-law, but merely as much gentlemanly courtesy as he would have bestowed upon any other guest. "You're looking uncommonly well! And you, 'Statia dear—it is quite an age since I have seen you!"—with which remark the Viscount just touched his sister's cheek with his lips.

"Where have you been all this time?" inquired Lady Anastatia.

"Heaven only knows," responded the Viscount, carelessly: and throwing himself languidly upon a seat, he said, "'Pon my soul, Sir Frederick, you are making your place look quite charming. Such taste as you have displayed! Where the deuce you got it all, I can't for the life of me conjecture—buried as you were for so many years——"

"In the midst of that honourable industry," said Sir Frederick Latham, "which has given me the wealth that I now enjoy, and which also had its interval of leisure for the acquirement and the cultivation of that taste which your lordship has just been pleased to eulogize."

There was a certain admixture of pomposity, vanity, and self-complacency in this speech: but yet it was scarcely perceptible, with so much calm composure was it delivered. It likewise conveyed a reproof in an indirect manner—the phrase of "honest industry" irresistibly making the impression of the contrast existing between the pursuits of the great merchant and those of the young lord who had so often been dependent on his bounty. Anastatia felt that impression, though she did not for an instant imagine that her husband had deliberately intended to convey it. As for the Viscount himself, he either did not or chose not to comprehend the allusion; and he said with a characteristic flippancy, "Ah! it's a devilish lucky thing that some men can settle themselves to high stools and awful big books in a dark, dingy counting-house: but hang me, if ever I could have brought my mind to it!"

At this moment the door was thrown open, and a domestic in a superb livery announced that dinner was served up. Nothing occurred during the repast which requires special mention: we will therefore suppose the cloth to have been removed—the dessert to be placed upon the table—Lady Anastatia to have retired to the drawing-room—

and the brothers-in-law to be left alone together. For some little while Viscount Rushbrook went on drinking, not merely with the air of one who was much attached to wine, but likewise with that of a person who was priming himself, so to speak, in order to enter upon the subject which, despite his natural self-sufficiency, he had some little diffidence in approaching. He was moreover casting about for an opportunity to enter upon it; and this opportunity Sir Frederick Latham did not appear inclined spontaneously to furnish, nor to assist in developing. Indeed, the great merchant seemed as if he had forgotten that part of the Viscount's letter which had alluded to important business: he went on talking on general topics, as if there were no special one to be brought upon the tapis;—and to the young nobleman it was with a most provoking indifference that Sir Frederick told him how long this particular wine had been in bottle, and by what a lucky chance he had got possession of that other sort—and how he intended to make such-and-such improvements in his grounds—and how much his firm hoped to gain from the great foreign loan which they had just contracted for and taken.

"Confound this fellow!" thought the Viscount within himself: "he is only doing this to humiliate me. He won't help me to come to the point: he means me to open the subject deliberately and methodically, without letting me gradually glide into it! This is the cursed pride of purse, which humbles our patrician pride of birth! By heaven, how I hate him!"

As he mentally made this last ejaculation, Viscount Rushbrook held up a bumper of port towards the brilliant chandelier suspended over-head, as if it were to examine its colour: but he was really the while eyeing the merchant askance, and studying his countenance to ascertain whether its expression afforded a hope that the favour he was presently to solicit would be granted. But how inscrutable was that countenance,—with its calmness, half cold, half self-sufficient—and with a certain gloss of dignity over all! Sir Frederick knew that the Viscount was looking at him—but affected not to have the slightest idea of it. He could read, too, all that was passing in Robert's mind: but he afforded not the faintest indication that such was the case. At length Anastatia's brother fancied himself sufficiently primed—which indeed he must have been, if a couple of bottles of wine could accomplish such priming: but still he was very far from being intoxicated.

"Ah! by the bye, Sir Frederick," he said, "did you happen to notice that little sentence in my letter where I intimated that I had a matter of importance to submit to you?"

"I did note it," answered the merchant, with business-like precision. "I never fail to observe and I never forget any announcement which appears to be stamped with a serious meaning."

"Ah, well—that's all right!" exclaimed the Viscount. "I was afraid you had lost sight of the thing."

Sir Frederick Latham poured a small quantity of wine into his own glass—for he was habitually temperate: but he said not another syllable in response.

"The fact is," continued the Viscount, first sipping his wine, and then playing with his silver fruit-knife, "I am in a little trouble at this moment——I don't mean *trouble* exactly, because I know that's a term which frightens you City gentlemen: but what I mean is that such a thing as a couple of thousand pounds would be of the very greatest service to me. I should know how to use it——"

"No doubt, my lord," said the merchant: "everybody knows how to make use of a couple of thousand pounds—especially in these times when no one ought to *mis*-use money."

"Just so," said the Viscount: "precisely my idea!"—and again he filled his glass—again he fidgeted with the silver fruit-knife—while in the depths of his heart he thought to himself, "Perdition take the cold-blooded fellow! he *will* make me put the question point blank to him, so that he may have the prideful satisfaction of giving a point-blank *yes*, or the malignant satisfaction of giving as direct a *no*."

There was a pause, during which Sir Frederick Latham sipped his wine with the most provoking composure; and Viscount Rushbrook grew more and more embarrassed, confused, and annoyed.

"Well, about this little business of mine," he said, at length mustering up his courage anew. "It's only a couple of thousand pounds—I don't exactly know when I can repay it—but of course I would give my bond——and if you, my dear Sir Frederick, would put me in the way of raising it amongst any of your friends——"

"My lord," interrupted the merchant, with an almost chilling dignity, "I have no money-lenders amongst my friends nor acquaintances——for I never borrow."

"To be sure not!" ejaculated the Viscount, affecting to laugh: "that would be too ridiculous!—a firm that can lend millions to a foreign Government to borrow at home! No, no!—I didn't mean that! But I was only thinking that perhaps you could put me in the way of raising this cursed little sum—for I cannot think of asking you for such a favour, after all that you have at different times done for me——"

"Now listen, Lord Rushbrook," interrupted Sir Frederick Latham, settling himself in a business-like manner in his chair, and speaking with a dignified sententiousness. "You want two thousand pounds: and what is more—you want me to give you that money?"

"Give? Oh, no, no!" ejaculated the Viscount. "I mean lend——"

"*Give*, I repeat," continued the merchant, with a slight emphasis on the word: for it was rather his look than his voice which rendered that word impressive when thus reiterated. "Well, my lord, you shall have this amount——"

"My dear Sir Frederick! 'pon my soul, I hardly know how to express myself! You're a true brother-in-law——"

"And you likewise," added Sir Frederick. "I told your sister so just now in the drawing-room. But I beg that you will listen to me; for it is absolutely necessary we should have some serious conversation——"

"To be sure! This wine's excellent," exclaimed the Viscount: "I could sit and talk over it all night!"

"You will not think it amiss," resumed the merchant, whose lips for a moment expressed

mingled contempt and disgust for the reckless dissipated flippancy of the Viscount, "if I enter upon certain recapitulations——"

"Do whatever you like, my dear Sir Frederick," exclaimed Rushbrook, who was now perfectly at his ease in respect to the loan he had asked for, inasmuch as he knew full well that his brother-in-law would faithfully fulfil any promise he had made. "'Pon my soul, this wine's capital!—— But I beg your pardon—I was interrupting you! Now then, I'm all attention——By the bye, hadn't we better have another bottle before we go deeper into serious discourse?"

"Listen to me, my lord," said the merchant, somewhat severely, and without heeding the hint relative to the fresh bottle. "It was not I who first sought the acquaintance of the Earl of Fordwich,—nor that of his son the Viscount Rushbrook: but it was a circumstance of a peculiar character—or what other term shall I use?—which made me acquainted with your lordship's family."

"But my dear Sir Frederick," exclaimed the Viscount, now wincing visibly at the merchant's words, which seemed fraught with an allusion that was only too intelligible, "you surely are not going to recapitulate——"

"Yes, my lord," said the merchant coldly, "I am going to recapitulate. You ask me a favour—and I will confer it in my own fashion, or else not at all:"—then drawing forth a pocket-book, Sir Frederick displayed several blank cheques; and he added, "One of these will I presently fill up for the amount you desire, provided you listen to all that I have to say. But remember! I do not force you; and if you decline to hear me, I replace my cheques in my pocket-book, and there is an end of the matter."

"But my dear Sir Frederick," stammered and faltered the Viscount, "there is something very strange about you this evening. What does it all mean? I scarcely think it is quite generous——"

"Oh! if you take it in that light, my lord," interrupted the merchant, "I can only answer that perhaps it will not be quite prudent for me to comply with your request."

Thus speaking, Sir Frederick Latham made a movement as if to shut up his pocket-book,—when the Viscount, who had the most desperate need of money, and would rather hear anything, however unpalatable, than abandon the chance of obtaining it,—hastened to exclaim, "Well, well, Sir Frederick, be it as you will. Proceed! I listen."

"It was between two and three years ago," said the merchant, still with that calm, business-like air which the young nobleman felt to be so provoking, "that a bill for two thousand pounds, purporting to be the acceptance of the Marquis of Swalecliffe—a nobleman well known upon the Turf—and drawn by Viscount Rushbrook, came in the course of business into the hands of the Firm to which I belong. This bill was a forgery: the Marquis's acceptance was a forged name—and Viscount Rushbrook was the forger!"

"Sir Frederick!" moaned Anastatia's brother piteously. "What if any one were listening?"

"No one listens improperly, my lord, in my house," replied the merchant. "Am I to go on?"

"Yes—if you will—I am at your mercy—— but this is indeed cruel!"

"It is a fashion which I have of bestowing the favour which is asked of me," rejoined Sir Frederick: and there was something coldly implacable in his tone. "Well, the bill came due: it was a forgery, as I have said: the Marquis of Swalecliffe disavowed it; and you, Lord Rushbrook, were stated to be upon the Continent. At all events, you were not to be found. Your father came to me in an agony of grief: I took pity on him: he himself could not pay the bill for you—a terrible exposure seemed to be staring you in the face. As for the Marquis,—he was inexorable: he vowed that justice should take its course—and that even though I, the holder of the bill, might arrange the matter with your father, he would expose you at all the Clubs—he would brand you as a villain. Then all of a sudden a change came over the Marquis. What influence was brought to bear upon him I know not: but doubtless the intercessions of your father and mother, privately made, prevailed. His lordship agreed that the matter should be hushed up; and I on my part agreed to exchange the forged bill against a note of hand which your father the Earl of Fordwich gave me. I need not add that it was the same as presenting you or your family with two thousand pounds; for until this day that note of hand remains unpaid."

"Not one syllable of all this have I ever denied," said the wretched Viscount; "nor do I deny it now. But wherefore, Sir Frederick——"

"Stop! you have promised to hear me," interrupted the implacable merchant: and he added with a cold sneer, "When our discourse is at an end, and I have filled up the cheque which you require, we will drink another bottle of wine of this very sort which you seem to like so well."

The Viscount's features brightened up in the faintest degree as he saw that the conversation on this topic must soon draw to an end, and that he would obtain the subsidy of which he stood so much in need.

"The circumstance to which I have referred," continued Sir Frederick Latham, "placed me on a footing of intimacy with your family. I became the husband of your sister; and at the same time I had the supreme honour"—here again he spoke with a cold sneer—"of advancing a few thousands for the benefit of your father. Nor was this all. Shortly after my marriage, you, my lord, became involved in fresh difficulties: you were outlawed for your debts: and every sheriff's officer in London was in search of you. Nay, more—there was one of your creditors,—a solicitor, who was also a money-lender,—that threatened you with an indictment for having obtained from him a loan under the falsest pretences; and again were you obliged to flee to the Continent—or at all events to hide yourself in some secure retreat. And who came forward to succour you? who settled your liabilities? who procured the reversal of the outlawries? who arranged that ugly matter with the usurious solicitor? In a word, who again saved you from ruin——nay, from worse than ruin—from utter degradation and dishonour? It was I, Frederick Latham, the City merchant."

"And did I not express my most grateful thanks?" asked the Viscount: "did I not, alike

by letter and by word of mouth, declare that you were my saviour and acknowledge the obligation under which I lay towards you."

"No doubt," rejoined Sir Frederick. "But letters may be as insincere as bills of exchange themselves may be fictitious: for the man who would forge a name to the latter, would scarcely hesitate to lie through the medium of the former. And then too, as for verbal expressions——Ah! my Lord Viscount Rushbrook, I know the value of such language from *your* lips!"

"Why, what—what—my dear Sir Frederick," stammered the young nobleman, looking dreadfully confused, despite his characteristic impudence, "what do you mean?"

"Every fable has its moral—every string of truths produce their corollary," replied the merchant, sententiously. "Think you that I have entered this night into all these recapitulations for the purpose of parading my own generosity in a pecuniary sense towards your father and yourself?—or think you that I seek to enhance the importance of the favour I am about to bestow upon you,—a favour which however great it may be in reference to your present necessities, is in respect to my means and resources of the most trumpery and trivial description. No—these are not my objects. But I wish to let you know, Lord Viscount Rushbrook, that I am not your dupe."

"My dupe? Ha! ha! Sir Frederick, that is really too good!"—and the Viscount affected to laugh chucklingly. "It would be rather difficult, I fancy, to get the better of a shrewd, clear-headed man of business such as you are."

"It is the very thing of which I am seeking to convince you," rejoined Sir Frederick: "for if I give you my money, and if I have given your father my money, it is that I toss my thousands to you patrician beggars of Belgravia, just as when the humour takes me I toss my pence to the grovelling mendicants of St. Giles's or Whitechapel."

"On my soul, these are hard words, Sir Frederick!" ejaculated the Viscount, colouring.

"Doubtless they are hard words," responded the merchant; "but it is your own fault, and that of your father, if they are now addressed to you. I will come to the point.. The Earl of Fordwich boasts that his patrician hand has been graciously and condescendingly pleased to grasp my plebeian hand. Such things as these is your Right Honourable father constantly saying; while your Right Honourable mother hesitates not to declare that her daughter was thrown away upon a City merchant, when with a little trouble and manœuvring she might no doubt have married one of her own sphere. Mark!—*one of her own sphere.* It is easy, therefore, to comprehend what your lady-mother thinks of me. But with *you*, my Lord Viscount, it is infinitely worse. In your sober moments as well as in your drunken revelries, you have spoken scornfully of the City merchant. Have the words '*vain, pompous, self-sufficient, upstart,*' never issued from your lips? But I will not dwell upon these things,—though I can assure you they wound me not; for I can scorn and despise them. I have said enough to convince you, my lord, that I am not your dupe. I know that in your heart you hate me: it is gall and wormwood for you to receive favours at my hands; and therefore, even in conferring them—and in giving you that which your necessities will not permit you to refuse, but which indeed they compel you to ask—I am revenged!"

Nothing could exceed the discomfiture of Viscount Rushbrook while Sir Frederick Latham thus spoke. The patrician dared not look the rich plebeian in the face. He was abashed—confounded—annihilated. But with the utmost coolness Sir Frederick Latham filled up a cheque for the sum of two thousand pounds; and as he passed it across the table to the Viscount, he said, "Not a word of what has passed need be repeated in the presence of Anastatia! And remember, my lord—when we rejoin your sister in the drawing-room, we wear countenances as if nothing extraordinary had taken place. And now, my lord, for that other bottle of wine which I promised you."

"Thanks for the accommodation," said the Viscount, now suddenly recovering all his self-possession and his flippant complacency. "But, ah! you have crossed this cheque—and I shall have to send it through my bankers',—whom, to tell you the truth, I have overdrawn to the tune of a few hundreds: so that they would intercept a considerable portion of this amount in order to repay themselves—which would by no means answer my purpose."

"Then come to me in the City to-morrow, and I will give you bank-notes," said the merchant. "Or stop, I think I can manage it in another way. Have the goodness to follow me, my lord."

Sir Frederick Latham rose from his seat, and issued from the room. He conducted the Viscount through the library, into a small cabinet, which served as a private office or study where Sir Frederick was wont to look over letters, or transact any other little business which he might manage at home, and on those days on which it was not necessary for him to proceed to his great establishment in the City. Drawing forth a key from his pocket, Sir Frederick opened an iron safe, which was concealed by a door formed in the beautifully painted and exquisitely gilt pannelling-work; and he took from that safe a cash-box containing a quantity of gold in one compartment and a number of bank-notes in another.

"Ah! I see, Sir Frederick," said the Viscount, with one of his flippant laughs, "that you always keep a good supply of money in the house in case of emergencies."

"Always," responded the merchant, with apparent coolness and indifference: but the proceeding was in reality another piece of ostentation on his part, to pique the envy of his patrician brother-in-law, whom he alike despised and hated.

When Sir Frederick had counted down bank-notes to the amount of a couple of thousand pounds, there was still a considerable amount left; and in the same spirit of ostentation, the merchant folded them up methodically—conducting the process in such a manner that Rushbrook might catch a glimpse of the word "HUNDRED" in the corner of some dozen or fifteen of these remaining notes.

"Shall I give you a little memorandum—an acknowledgment—a note of hand—or anything you think fit?" inquired the Viscount, as he thrust into his pocket the two thousand pounds just handed to him.

"It is really useless to spoil a good sheet of paper, my lord," was the merchant's coldly contemptuous reply, as he locked up the safe.

The Viscount affected to laugh: but he bit his lip with deep concentrated rage, as he thought within himself, "Insult upon insult! The purse-pride of this up-start plebeian is intolerable!"

While that expression of impotent fury was still upon Rushbrook's countenance, the full gaze of Latham's cold blue eyes was suddenly turned upon him—indeed with an abruptness that made Rushbrook start. But again recovering his self-possession, he ran his fingers through his dark hair,—saying with another laugh, "Now, then, for this bottle which is promised."

Sir Frederick Latham led the way back to the dining-room—rang the bell—and gave the order for the wine. As he sate for another half-hour with the Viscount, his discourse again turned upon general topics; and he spoke precisely as if nothing unpleasant had taken place,—while his demeanour exhibited that courtesy, so coldly polished, which was habitual with him. The fresh supply of wine being finished, the merchant and the Viscount repaired to the drawing-room,—where they partook of coffee with Anastatia; and the young lady had not the slightest reason to suspect that anything of a disagreeable character had occurred betwixt her husband and her brother.

It was about eleven o'clock when the Viscount's dashing phaeton was driven round, by the exquisitely dressed groom, from the stables to the front of the mansion. The night was very dark; and the lamps of the vehicle were lighted. Lord Rushbrook, having taken leave of his sister and his brother-in-law, paused for a few moments in the hall to light a cigar; and he then ascended to the box-seat,—receiving the whip and reins from the hands of his groom. He was somewhat the worse for the great quantity of wine which he had drunk; and the domestic, if he had dared, would have remonstrated against his master's undertaking to drive on the occasion: but he knew the Viscount's temper, and accordingly held his peace. His lordship was in rare spirits: he had the two thousand pounds in his pocket—he was elated with wine—he was proud of his beautiful turn-out—and the impression of the disagreeable scene with his brother-in-law having now completely worn off, he said to himself, "Since Latham never refuses his money, I shan't hesitate in future in applying to him even oftener than I have hitherto done."

The equipage dashed along the avenue towards the gates which were thrown open by the porter; and as the steeds flew through that entrance-way, the groom noticed with a shudder how closely the wheel whisked past the iron post. The road upon which they entered, was broad and even: the horses knew that they were returning homeward; and they proceeded at a rapid rate. The equipage had scarcely gone a quarter of a mile from the gates, when on turning a somewhat sharp corner, the phaeton dashed against a post, and was instantaneously overturned.

The groom was stunned, and lay senseless on the road: but as if the adage should be fulfilled which declares "there is a special providence for drunken men and children," the Viscount escaped totally unhurt. He was instantaneously upon his feet; and he fancied that a man, wearing some strange white dress, was at the horses' heads,—to which indeed the stranger had instantaneously rushed, he being on that very spot at the time—so that the wild progress of the animals was arrested.

"Thank you, my good fellow!" said Rushbrook, shaking himself as he sprang up to his feet. "Just hold on there for a moment while I look to the groom. Ah!" he continued, having examined his dependant, "he is stunned, but not killed. Well! that's lucky. And now for the carriage. Well, by heaven! this is lucky again! Nothing broken that I can see, except the lamps. I think those horses will stand now. Just come and lend me a hand to set the phaeton upright."

The man to whom these words were addressed, did not give utterance to a syllable in reply: but still he appeared to comprehend what was said; for having patted the horses's necks, he approached the Viscount.

"Why, you are a Lascar—or a Chinaman—a Malay—or something of the sort?" exclaimed Rushbrook, as the man emerged from the comparative obscurity: for the lights of both the lamps were extinguished—there were no gas-lamps in that part of the road—nor was there any house near. "Why the deuce don't you speak. You seem to understand me."

The Lascar made a sign that he was dumb: but he at once addressed himself to the business of raising the phaeton,—which he did in a very few moments by his own unaided strength. The groom was now recovering; and the Lascar, lifting the man in his powerful arms, placed him in the vehicle.

"You are a very useful fellow," said the Viscount; "and I can't think of giving you less than five shillings for your services."

Thus speaking, the nobleman thrust his hand into his breeches' pocket; and with that carelessness which was partially characteristic, and partially the result of his inebriate condition, he pulled forth all the contents of that pocket—gold, silver, and bank-notes. Quick as lightning the Lascar seized upon the notes: it was one rapid clutch which he made at them; and the next instant he was darting away as quick as his legs could carry him.

"Stop thief!" vociferated the Viscount, wild with rage and fury: but even before his voice had ceased to vibrate in the air, the white garments of the robber were lost in the darkness of the night.

A terrible execration burst from Rushbrook's lips: but he dared not speed in pursuit. In the first place, he was a coward: ideas of daggers and knives connected with that Lascar, swept through his brain;—and in the second place, he dared not quit the equipage. His hasty ejaculations startled the groom almost completely back into life; and he said, "What is the matter, my lord?"

Rushbrook was on the very point of proclaiming the extent to which he had been robbed,—when it struck him that if he were to do so, he must inevitably cut the figure of the veriest dastard in the eyes of his dependant, for not having at once pursued the plunderer. Thus, though almost maddened with vexation, his pride nevertheless inspired him with sufficient self-possession to make

him hold his peace on that score; and he exclaimed, "Oh, it was nothing! Only the strange manner in which that fellow darted away after I had given him a few shillings."

The groom's thoughts were still too much in confusion for him to perceive at the moment that there was something strange in the business, and that his master was speaking evasively. When he subsequently reflected upon it, it was too late to put any further questions.

Rushbrook now inquired if the groom were very much hurt? The man responded that he was considerably shaken; but he congratulated himself on having broken no bones. The Viscount resumed his seat: but he drove very cautiously for the remaininder of the journey; and all the way homeward to his father's residence in Park Lane, he never ceased inwardly cursing his ill luck, which had deprived him of a sum that was so much needed by existing circumstances.

CHAPTER CXXII.

THE BRILLIANT ENTERTAINMENT.

FOUR or five days elapsed after the incidents which we have been describing; and Lady Anastatia Latham knew not precisely what course to adopt in respect to Madame Augelique. She had promised Shadbolt at the time to call upon her: but the pledge was hastily given, for the purpose of getting rid of the man; and afterwards Anastatia did not like to fulfil it. Equally distasteful to her was the idea of writing to Madame Angelique upon the subject of the claim made upon her; and thus these four or five days had passed away without anything being done. A grand entertainment was now about to be given at Tudor Lodge; and this was for the moment engrossing her ladyship's attention.

"You will see to-night a very interesting young couple," said Sir Frederick Latham to Anastatia, as they were seated together at breakfast on the morning of the day on which the entertainmet was to be given.

"A young married couple?" said Anastatia inquiringly.

"No—brother and sister," responded her husband; "and they are twins. Their name is Ashton; and as if all circumstances should combine to augment the interest which envelopes them, they bear the names of Christian and Christina."

"Perhaps it was a mother's pious love which bestowed these names upon her twin-offspring?" said Lady Anastatia.

"I do not know the circumstances," answered Sir Frederick Latham: "but I will tell you how it is that Mr. and Miss Ashton are to be our guests this evening, and wherefore I am about to ask you, Anastatia, to show them all possible attention."

"You know full well, Sir Frederick," responded the amiable wife, "that no expressed wish of yours is ever wilfully neglected by me. I will show Mr. and Miss Ashton every attention—not merely because you desire it—nor because mere ordinary courtesy would have prompted such conduct on my part—but likewise because I am already interested in this young brother and sister."

"I was about to give you some little explanation," resumed Sir Frederick. "There has been for a while past an Indian lady of rank staying in the British metropolis—but maintaining a strict *incognita*. By the death of her father she has recently attained a still higher rank; and large funds have been remitted to England for her use. These moneys were paid through our correspondent's house at Calcutta; and it yesterday became necessary that I should see the lady of whom I am speaking, at her residence in the district of Bayswater. There I met Mr. and Miss Ashton, as well as a gentleman of the name of Redcliffe. Having received the lady's instructions in respect to the large funds which our firm holds on her account, I ventured to hint that if it were agreeable, you, Anastatia, would call and pay your respects. The lady expressed her thanks, and with much courtesy gave me to understand that she was desirous of living in seclusion during her sojourn in this country. But she remarked that she by no means wished to condemn her beloved friend Miss Ashton to a similar monotony of existence: for it appears that Miss Ashton resides altogether with the Indian lady—while Mr. Ashton and Mr. Redcliffe were only the temporary visitors of a few hours. To be brief, I succeeded in inducing Mr. and Miss Ashton to accept an invitation to our entertainment this evening; and you may therefore expect them."

Sir Frederick Latham, as Indora's financial agent, had necessarily been made acquainted with her queenly rank: but as the matter was a secret, he—with the characteristic caution of business-habits—forebore from revealing the truth even to his own wife. He had striven hard to induce Indora to visit at his house. He had calculated that if she would only make her appearance for an hour in his brilliant saloons, the presence of a lady of such matchless beauty—even though her Sovereign rank should still remain concealed—would give an immense *eclat* to the entertainment. But Indora had declined,—not merely for the reason which she had alleged, but likewise because she deemed it her duty to bestow as much attention as possible upon the wounded Sagoonah. She nevertheless urged Christina to accept the invitation: while Mr. Redcliffe had by a sign intimated to Christian that he also was to respond in the affirmative. Thus, although Sir Frederick had failed to obtain the presence of Queen Indora at his mansion, he had nevertheless succeeded in respect to the young brother and sister, whose personal beauty was of so exceedingly interesting a character, and who could not therefore fail to create a sensation. But Sir Frederick did not choose to enter into these full explanations with his wife, Lady Anastatia: he never suffered her to perceive the amount of pains he took to render his entertainments so brilliant, attractive, and varied, that they should even excite the envy of the patrician guests who might be present at them.

At about nine o'clock in the evening there was a continuous line of carriages rolling along the avenue of Sir Frederick's grounds, and setting down the fashionably apparelled guests at the mansion. The edifice itself was a perfect blaze of light; and all the arrangements were upon a scale

which denoted an utter disregard for expense. Sir Frederick was indeed immensely rich; and the sum of money which such an entertainment as this might cost him, was an insignificant outlay when considered in reference to his means. The brilliant saloons were soon crowded with guests,—amongst whom were what might be termed the aristocracy of the commercial world, as well as a considerable assemblage of members of the patrician aristocracy itself.

Lord and Lady Fordwich were prevented by indisposition from appearing at this entertainment: but Viscount Rushbrook was there. This nobleman had for the last few days been revolving in his mind a thousand pretexts for making another draw upon the merchant's purse: but he had as yet failed to hit upon any plan which might reasonably account for an application following so close on the heels of the former one. Nevertheless, it was absolutely necessary for the Viscount to obtain fifteen hundred or a thousand pounds with the shortest possible delay: for not being himself a Peer, nor even a Member of the House of Commons, he was unprotected against arrest; and he knew that there was a warrant out for his apprehension on account of an unpaid bond which had just fallen due. To be incarcerated would prove his ruin: it would bring all his difficulties to the climax: his creditors—most of whom were now kept quiet by promises, or else were ignorant that he was in London—would flock around him like a nest of hornets. The reader will therefore comprehend that it was a matter of the most vital importance for Lord Rushbrook to procure without delay the wherewith to satisfy the creditor who sought to plunge him into prison.

He knew full well that although Anastatia was supplied with ample means for all her current expenses—and that though she might let him have (as indeed she had frequently done) such a sum as

a hundred pounds—it was totally useless to ask her to furnish from her own purse the much larger amount that he needed. He dared not explain to his brother-in-law the precise truth of the adventure with the false Lascar; because he knew perfectly well that not for a single minute would Sir Frederick Latham put faith in such a tale—but that on the contrary he would be sure to regard it as the most shallow and impudent pretext for obtaining an additional supply of money. What course was the Viscount to adopt? He knew not: he was cruelly bewildered—he was miserably perplexed: he had no heart for the enjoyment of the festivities to which he had come; but he had made his appearance at Tudor Lodge in the hope that the chapter of accidents might evolve some circumstance which he could possibly turn to his advantage. Thus, if, for instance, he should find his brother-in-law in a better mood towards him than usual—if the gratified vanity of beholding a grand entertainment prove most brilliantly successful, should open the heart of the City merchant,—or again, if it were possible to induce Anastatia to plead on his behalf, devising some pretext for the plea itself,—Lord Rushbrook was determined to be ready to take advantage of any such favourable incident.

Amongst the equipages which rolled up to the entrance of Tudor House, was the carriage of Queen Indora; and this contained Christian and Christina. The moment they entered the brilliantly-lighted saloon, Sir Frederick Latham led his wife forward to greet the twins with a fitting welcome; and the amiable Anastatia, already predisposed to like them, was at once smitten with the conviction that her sympathies had flowed in a channel which would yield no future cause for regret. There was something so exceedingly interesting, even pathetically touching, in the appearance of this brother and sister—such a striking similitude between them—and their personal beauty was of so high and intellectual an order,—that it was impossible for any one who had a heart susceptible of right and proper feeling, to be otherwise than moved towards this young pair. Though their manners were naturally retired and unobtrusive, yet had they gentility's perfect gloss: every gesture denoted good breeding; and there was an elegance as well as a refinement about them which would have led a stranger to believe that they were the offspring of one of the highest families in the land. Christina leant upon her brother's arm,—her beautiful shape set off by a costume which was characterized by tasteful elegance; and though she had received costly gifts from Queen Indora and from Mr. Redcliffe, yet did she now wear little jewellery,—not because she herself egotistically appreciated the poetical aphorism which says that "beauty when unadorned is adorned the most,"—but because her taste in this respect was naturally simple. Her raven hair flowed in heavy tresses upon her polished, stainless shoulders; and as this was the first time she had ever made her appearance in so large and brilliant an assemblage, there was a certain flutter in her heart, which gave a carnation hue to her cheeks; and this animation rendered her beauty not merely interesting, but likewise brilliant at the moment.

Her brother Christian certainly never appeared to greater advantage. The evening costume which he wore—the black dress coat and pantaloons, with the snowy white waistcoat—set off the slender symmetry of his shape: and his dark hair, parted in natural curls above his high open forehead, enframed as it were that seat of the loftiest thoughts. No wonder therefore that this beautiful young couple—for the word *beautiful* is not misused even in reference to the masculine good looks of our young hero himself—should have created a considerable sensation when they entered the saloon. Sir Frederick Latham perceived the effect thus produced: he saw that the young pair had in a moment become the cynosure of attraction; and though he outwardly betrayed not what he felt, yet did he inwardly congratulate himself on the policy which had induced him to invite Christian and Christina to his entertainment.

After Sir Frederick and Lady Anastatia Latham had conversed for a little while with Mr. and Miss Ashton, the dancing commenced. Sir Frederick requested Christian to open the ball with her ladyship,—thus doing everything he could to put our hero forward as his principal male guest. He himself never danced: but Viscount Rushbrook became Christina's partner for the first quadrille.

This first quadrille was just drawing to a close, when Christina, on glancing towards the extremity of the room, caught a glimpse of a countenance which brought the warm blood up to her cheeks: but the next instant that colour vanished—and for a few moments she was exceedingly pale. This transitory display of emotion on her part however passed unnoticed; and the dance being over, the Viscount conducted her to a seat. He remained conversing with her for a few minutes longer; and then, as her brother rejoined her, the nobleman retired to another part of the room. Sir Frederick Latham almost immediately came up to discourse with the twins; and soon did the splendid band give notice that the next dance was about to commence. Christian was introduced to some young lady of rank for this second quadrille; and scarcely had he quitted Christina's side, when a well-known voice, speaking low and tremulously, said, "May I have the pleasure of Miss Ashton's hand on the present occasion?"

All the proper pride, modesty, and self-possession of the young lady immediately came to her aid, as she rose from her seat and gave her hand to Lord Octavian Meredith: for he it was of whose countenance she had caught a glimpse, as ere now stated, amidst the lookers-on at the farther extremity of the brilliantly lighted saloon. A sense of duty, having several phases—duty towards herself—duty towards this young nobleman who was the husband of another—duty towards that other, the amiable Zoe, who was Christina's friend—inspired the young maiden with a degree of firmness which made her heart glow with satisfaction at the thought that she should be enabled to command it. No change took place in her countenance: her hand trembled not as it rested in that of Lord Octavian;—yet *his* hand trembled—and she felt that it did so. For a moment her looks had encountered his own when she rose from her seat to give him that hand: but as he led her to the place which they were to take in the dance, she looked straightforward, yet without having any visible air of embarrassment or restraint. Nevertheless, although

to every one else Christina's aspect and bearing were devoid of aught to create any particular attention—yet Lord Octavian felt as if his heart were riven with a pang: for to him this calm firmness appeared a proof of indifference. He said not a word for several minutes after he had invited her to dance with him: but still he had sufficient presence of mind to avoid betraying by his looks the feelings which were agitating in his breast.

"Little did I expect the pleasure of encountering you here," he presently said: and again his voice was low and tremulous. "I have mingled but little in society lately——I came hither to-night to distract my mind as it were from the thoughts which are ever agitating it——"

"May I inquire," asked Christina, "if your lordship has lately heard——"

"From Zoe? Yes:"—and he heaved a profound sigh. "I see that your brother is here," he immediately added, evidently for the purpose of changing the topic.

The circumstances of the dance suddenly interrupted the discourse; and when the figure was ended, Lord Octavian was evidently too much embarrassed to know how to resume the conversation. Christina therefore began to speak on indifferent topics: but her position was growing more and more embarrassing and painful; for by a kind of intuitive knowledge she comprehended what Meredith himself felt.

"Is it possible, Christina," he presently said, in a low deep voice, "that I have become an object of utter indifference towards you? You are scarcely courteous towards me—your manner is absolutely chilling——"

"I am incapable of behaving with a wilful deficiency of courtesy," replied Christina: but there was something in the quick look which she flung upon the young nobleman, which seemed to imply that if she did not absolutely resent, yet she at least deprecated his calling her by her Christian name.

"But why thus cold towards me?" he asked: "why thus freezing? Surely I have not offended you?"

"No, my lord—you have not offended me," she answered. "But may I beg that you will cease these reproaches?"

Again did the circumstances of the dance interrupt the discourse; and when it was renewed, Christina talked in a manner which as plainly as possible forbade any recurrence to that which she evidently regarded as forbidden ground.

"May I expect the pleasure of dancing again with you this evening?" he inquired in a tone of earnest appeal, as he conducted her back to her seat.

"I beg your lordship to excuse me," replied Christina: and the response was given with a firmness which again sent a pang through Meredith's heart.

"But this is most unkind!" he said, almost passionately, though in a very low voice. "At least we are friends? You do not answer me!"—and then, after a moment's pause, he added, "Christina, you will drive me to despair!"

"One word, my lord!" rejoined the young maiden firmly. "I cannot be guilty of so much ridiculous affectation as to pretend to be ignorant of these allusions: but I beseech your lordship to understand that I shall regard your conduct in the light of a persecution if you persist in it."

Having thus spoken, Christina rose from the seat to which she had been conducted, and proceeded to join Lady Anastatia, who was now conversing with Christian and two or three others on the opposite side of the apartment. In one sense it cost Christina a severe pang to behave in this manner towards Lord Octavian: but in another sense she was rejoiced—yes, absolutely rejoiced—because she felt that she had done her duty, and there was a glowing approval within the region of her own conscience. As for Lord Octavian himself, nothing could exceed the distress of mind that he experienced,—although he had sufficient fortitude to avoid the outward betrayal thereof. Issuing from the saloon, he went forth upon the landing, to obtain if possible a less heated atmosphere; for his brows were fevered and were throbbing violently. He passed on into the refreshment-room, where he obtained some cooling beverage; and thence he entered a conservatory, where he found himself completely alone. Here he gave way to his reflections.

Lady Anastatia Latham was conversing with some of her guests, as already stated, when a footman drawing near to the group, hovered a few moments about it, in such a manner as to indicate that he wished to speak to his mistress. She moved away from her friends; and he said to her, "Please your ladyship, there is that person—Mr. Shadbolt—who has called again and requests a few minutes' interview."

"Did you not tell him that I was particularly engaged?" asked Anastatia, the colour for an instant rushing to her cheeks.

"I did, my lady," replied the domestic: "but, to tell your ladyship the truth, he insists——"

"Enough!" interrupted Anastatia: and then, with regained self-possession, she added, "Yes, the business is of importance. I will speak to him. Where is he?"

"I showed him into the breakfast-parlour, my lady," answered the footman: "for, to tell your ladyship the truth," added the man, with an air of concern, "he is the worse for liquor—and I scarcely dared venture to bring his message to your ladyship."

Anastatia moved hastily away: she felt humiliated in the presence of her servant. There was something degrading in the idea that she should be asked for by a person who came in a state of intoxication, and that she should not dare bid the domestic turn him away from the house. She was considerably agitated—though outwardly this excitement was scarcely visible to the crowd of guests amongst whom she passed on her way towards the door of the ball-room. She issued forth—descended the stairs—and proceeded to the breakfast-parlour.

Now, it happened that Sir Frederick Latham was standing at a little distance from the spot where that rapid conversation had taken place between Anastatia and the domestic. He had seen the servant hover about the group in order to gain speech with Anastatia; and he had marked that glow which had crimsoned her countenance. He naturally concluded that something wrong had occurred in the household arrangements, and that something might suddenly have been discovered to be defective with reference to the splendid supper

which was to be spread in the banqueting-room. He therefore beckoned the footman forth upon the landing; and he said, "What has occurred to annoy her ladyship?"

For an instant the man looked confused, and seemed as if he would rather not have been questioned: but, as at a second glance towards his master's countenance, he caught the gaze of the merchant's cold blue eyes fixed steadfastly and searchingly upon him, he stammered out, "It is nothing particular, sir——only a person who has called on some little business——"

"Called on business at such an hour and on such an occasion!" said the merchant. "Who is this person!"

"The same, sir," was the footman's response, "who called the other day, when you questioned me——"

"Ah! the person who gave the name of Shadbolt?" said Sir Frederick: and though his countenance continued coldly impassive, yet was his mind inwardly troubled: for he had not forgotten the confusion shown by his wife immediately after that former visit of Shadbolt's, and which indeed had led him to question the footman as to who the individual was. "And on what plea did this person solicit an interview at such an hour?" he asked.

Again the domestic looked confused: again did he meet the cold steady searching gaze of his master; and thinking he had better tell whatsoever he knew, he said, "I informed this Mr. Shadbolt that there was a large party at the house, and that her ladyship was particularly engaged: but he insisted upon seeing her ladyship——and in short, sir, he said it was something about a debt for which he had to claim payment."

Now did all the proud blood of the City merchant rush to his cheeks: his lips quivered—his eyes glistened—he even made a gesture of rage; and for that one instant he betrayed more emotion in the presence of his domestic than he had ever before done. But in another instant it had passed; and in a voice that was perfectly cold and firm, he said, "Do you know to whom this debt is due, or what is its amount?"

"No, sir," replied the footman. "Mr. Shadbolt said nothing upon these points; and it appeared to me that when he did let drop something about a debt which he had to claim, it slipped out inadvertently—because, sir, to tell the truth, the man is the worse for liquor."

Again did the blood rush to the merchant's countenance: he too felt humiliated, as his wife had ere now done, that such a thing should become known to the menials of the household: but again quickly recovering himself, he said, "This must be some mistake: it is impossible her ladyship can owe any money. However, you will do well to keep your own counsel upon the point:"—and Sir Frederick placed a couple of guineas in the servant's hand.

The man bowed, and was about to retire, when his master said, "Go and tell your mistress that I wish to speak to her for a moment in my private room; and let this Shadbolt wait until after I have thus spoken to her ladyship."

We must now return to Anastatia herself. She had repaired to the breakfast-parlour, where Mr. Shadbolt awaited her presence. He had partaken somewhat copiously of wine—and haply of spirits likewise, after his dinner; and though very far from being completely intoxicated, he was nevertheless considerably elevated. He rose from his seat as Lady Anastatia, in her elegant ball-room apparel, made her appearance: but he had the air of one who was doggedly resolute in carrying out the point he had in view.

"What means this intrusion at such an hour and on such an occasion?" asked Anastatia, with mingled indignation and trepidation.

"Why, your ladyship did not keep your word," responded Shadbolt; "and therefore I thought there was no necessity to stand on niceties in this little matter."

"I will communicate with Madame Angelique to-morrow," replied Anastatia, with glowing cheeks. "I could not do so before."

"But your ladyship may forget when to-morrow comes, as you have done for the last few days—and therefore," added Shadbolt resolutely, "we had better settle the business off-hand."

"The demand is a mistake," she responded, "and I can easily satisfy Madame Angelique that it is so."

"And Madame Angelique says over and over again that it is *no* mistake whatsoever. Come, my lady—you had better pay the money at once, and avoid all unpleasantness. To be plain with you, Madame Angelique is determined to have it: and her resolution is represented in your ladyship's humble servant, honest Ike Shadbolt."

It was now for the first time that a suspicion of intended extortion flashed to the mind of Lady Anastatia Latham. The blood ran cold to her heart—the next instant it coursed like molten lead in its crimson channels. She knew not how to treat the matter—whether to repel the demand with indignation, or to submit to it and promise the money for the morrow. At that instant the door opened: and the footman entering, said, "If you please, my lady, Sir Frederick wishes to speak to you a moment in his study."

Anastatia was for an instant smitten as if by dismay at this announcement; and she was on the point of asking the domestic some question, when he said, "And perhaps, my lady, Mr. Shadbolt had better remain until your ladyship comes back to him."

Without a word Anastatia issued from the room: but when in the hall she put to the footman the question to which she had a few instants back been on the point of giving utterance.

"What does Sir Frederick want me for?" she asked, as if with an air of indifference.

"Sir Frederick questioned me, my lady," responded the footman: "and to tell your ladyship the truth, I was compelled to inform him that Mr. Shadbolt had called for payment of some little debt——"

"Ah!—then Mr. Shadbolt himself must have spoken to you?" said Anastatia: and it was with the utmost difficulty she could maintain an air of composure.

"He only told me that much, my lady," was the lacquey's response. "I could not help answering Sir Frederick——"

"Certainly not!" interjected Anastatia, with an air of dignified self-possession. "It was your duty."

Lady Anastatia Latham then proceeded direct to her husband's study, with the determination, if needed, of making a certain confession: but it was with a sense of dismay that she adopted the resolve. She entered the study—where she found her husband seated at the desk, and reading a letter with his wonted demeanour of imperturbable calmness.

"My dear Anastatia," he said, rising from his seat and advancing towards her, "it has perhaps been a little oversight on my part that I have not occasionally given you the key of this safe in order that you may replenish your purse without the necessity of applying direct to me. Here is the key: you can restore it to me presently. And now, my dear Anastatia, delay not in returning amongst your guests."

Having thus spoken, with an unusual appearance of kindness, Sir Frederick at once issued from the room. The whole proceeding was so completely different from what Anastatia had expected, that she was rendered absolutely speechless, and could not even murmur a syllable of acknowledgment for her husband's generosity. When the door closed behind him, and she found herself alone, tears began trickling down her cheeks. She comprehended it all.

"Yes," she said within herself, "he suspects that I am in debt—that I have been extravagant—that I have concealed my embarrassments from him; and he adopts this nobly generous course for a twofold reason. He affords me the opportunity of acquitting myself of my supposed liabilities; and at the same time he conveys a reproof for the mingled extravagance and dissimulation of which he deems me guilty. Oh, it is painful to be thus wrongly judged!—but on the other hand, infinite is the relief which I experience at not being compelled to confess everything! I understand him well. He will speak no more upon the subject: he will not ask me who are my supposed creditors: he doubtless thinks within himself that, touched by his generosity and goodness, I shall abstain from extravagance for the future. And I who have not been extravagant at all!—I who have even been enabled to assist my brother from the liberal sums which my husband has placed at my disposal!"

To this effect were the thoughts which swept rapidly through the mind of Lady Anastatia Latham; and drying her tears, she hastened to open the safe. But she paused ere she took forth the cash-box: she made a strong effort to conjure up her moral courage; and she said to herself, "What if I were now to defy these extortioners?"

But the moral courage came not in sufficient force to nerve her to that extent. She dreaded an explosion of Shadbolt's brutal rage; he might create a scene which would be fraught with a terrific exposure at a moment when the mansion was crowded with guests. She felt her own weakness; and with a profound sigh she drew forth the cash-box. There was a quantity of gold on one side—a layer of bank-notes on the other. She took forth sufficient for the liquidation of Madame Angelique's extortionate demand; and restoring the cash-box to its place, she locked the massive door of the safe,—thrusting the key into the bosom of her dress.

Lady Anastatia then returned to Mr. Shadbolt: and with dignified demeanour, she said, "Remember, I totally deny the claim which is made upon me: but I do not wish to have any dispute for such a sum. Here therefore is the amount. Of course you are provided with a receipt?"

"Here it is, my lady," answered Shadbolt, infinitely rejoiced at the success of his villanous scheme: and at the same time he drew forth the receipt from his pocket.

Anastatia examined it; and perceiving that it was an acquittance in full of all demands, signed with the ex-milliner's own name, she was satisfied. Shadbolt took his departure with the money in his pocket; and Anastatia returned to the ball-room. It happened that at the moment of her entrance Sir Frederick was passing near that door; she flung upon him a look full of gratitude,—at the same time laying her hand gently upon his arm, and saying, "You have this night done something which I can never, never forget! Here is the key of the safe:"—and she raised her hand to her bosom to take it thence.

"Not another syllable upon the subject, Anastatia!" responded the merchant: "and as for the key, keep it until to-morrow. We shall be observed!"

He at once walked away to another part of the room; while Anastatia—who was deeply affected, though she outwardly betrayed it not—repaired to a seat at a little distance.

Neither the merchant nor herself had noticed that her brother, Viscount Rushbrook, had been close by at the instant this exchange of a few words took place; and we may add that his quick ear had caught these few syllables which related to the key of the safe.

CHAPTER CXXIII.

THE SAFE AND THE CASH-BOX.

ANASTATIA repaired, as we have said, to a seat at the farther extremity of the room; and her brother the Viscount, after reflecting for a few moments, lounged round the apartment in order to join her there. He was revolving in his mind how to break to his sister the particular subject of his difficulties, when Christian and Christina approached. Anastatia's countenance immediately brightened up; and she spoke to the twins with as much cordiality as if they were long-standing friends instead of the mere acquaintances of this particular evening. The Viscount joined in the discourse as a pretext for keeping near his sister: but he wished in his heart that Christian and Christina would move away to another part of the room. It happened that while Anastatia was thus talking, she mechanically arranged the body of her dress—or rather the lace which trimmed it; and the little key fell from her bosom. It alighted on the flowing skirt of her apparel, and thus did not fall at once upon the floor, whence the carpet had been taken up for the sake of the dancers. The Viscount, who was lounging against a table behind his sister's chair, noticed that the key thus fell: the incident was however unperceived by Lady Anastatia as well as by the twins. For a few minutes Lord Rushbrook suffered the key to remain where it was, in order to ascertain whether his sister would immediately

miss it: but finding that she did not, he dropped his handkerchief as if quite accidentally. Picking it up again, he took up the key with it: for he had so managed the fall of the kerchief that it alighted immediately over the key itself.

Another dance was now about to commence. Lady Anastatia, rising from her seat, hastened to introduce Christian to a partner; while some young scion of the aristocracy engaged Christina's hand for that quadrille. Lord Rushbrook was now at liberty to act according to the evil promptings of his own unprincipled mind. He felt tolerably well assured that he possessed the key of the safe. In the first place, he thought that he recollected it, as it was a key of peculiar construction; and in the second place the words which he had overheard his sister hastily whisper to her husband, strengthened the belief that he held in his possession the means of supplying his necessities. As for compunction, he had none: his only thought now was how to achieve his object without being observed or interrupted.

He sauntered through the rooms with a fashionable lounging air: he passed out upon the landing; and watching a favourable opportunity, he glided down the stairs. On reaching the hall, accident again served his disreputable purpose; for it happened that none of the domestics were within view at the moment. In less than a minute the Viscount was in his brother-in-law's study, where the light had been left burning after Anastatia's brief interview with her husband there. To open the safe and take out the cash-box was now the work of an instant. A hasty glance at the contents of the box showed the Viscount that they must consist of at least fifteen or sixteen hundred pounds; and he secured every golden coin and every bank-note about his own person.

On closing the safe—to which he of course returned the cash-box—he happened to glance towards the window, the blind of which was not pulled down; and at that very same moment it struck the nobleman that a human countenance was withdrawn. Yes—a human countenance which had evidently been looking upon him, and which had observed this act of robbery——unless indeed it were a delusion—a phantom conjured up by his own guilty conscience at the instant Rushbrook felt the blood congeal into ice in his veins: he could not have been more dismayed if his brother-in-law had suddenly made his appearance—or if a police-constable had that moment placed a hand upon his shoulder. For several instants he stood completely transfixed; and then he rushed to the window. It was a moonlight night: the window looked upon a grass plat at the side of the house: no human being was to be seen—no gliding figure amongst the trees. Still there was ample time during the Viscount's consternation for any individual to disappear round the angle of the building; and thus because he saw no one he dared not come to the conclusion that no one had looked into the study.

Rushbrook was irresolute how to act. Should he return the notes and gold to the cash-box and drop the key somewhere? or should he keep his plunder and run every risk? Prudence suggested the former course—his dire necessities commanded the latter; so that at length—with that recklessness, half flippant, half desperate, which characterizes unscrupulous individuals in certain circumstances—he said to himself, "Well, at all risks I will keep the money!"

He stole forth unperceived from the study, and reascended to the ball-room. There, still unobserved, he dropped the key near the very chair in which Anastatia had been seated when it glided down from the bosom of her dress. He continued to lounge about the rooms: but there was a presentiment of evil floating in his mind: the possession of the money did not contribute to his happiness, nor relieve him from the apprehension that the mode in which it had come into his hands might be discovered. As for the countenance itself, he had no definite idea of it: he had no sooner caught a glimpse of it than it was gone: as soon as seen, it vanished. Yet that he had really beheld that countenance, he could not conceal from himself: he dared not flatter his mind that it was a mere delusion.

Christina danced the quadrille with the young scion of the aristocracy; and when it was over she was conducted back to a seat. Scarcely had her late partner quitted her side, than Lord Octavian Meredith rejoined her. He looked pale: but still there was a certain expression of decisiveness in his regards and on his lips, which immediately struck Christina—for an instant even alarming her; for he had on this night repeated that which he had said to her before—namely, that she would drive him to despair.

"Will you favour me with a few minutes' conversation somewhere?" he asked, in a voice which, though low, sounded strange and even unnatural, as if the speaker were under the influence of feelings tensely wrung—painfully wrought up.

"For what purpose, my lord?" asked our young heroine: and there was a tremulousness in her own voice.

"Not to repeat anything which you may not hear," he quickly responded. "My mind is made up! The resolution I have adopted will, I know, afford you satisfaction"—he paused, and added, "perhaps pleasure!"

Christina hesitated for an instant; and then—self-reliant, conscious that she had the power to perform her duty as she had already performed it an hour and a half back on this same evening—she said, "Yes, my lord—I will grant you a few minutes' private conversation, if you know where we can have it."

She took his arm; and he said not another word as he led her forth from the ball-room to the refreshment-room, where several other ladies and gentlemen were assembled; and two or three were at the time returning from the conservatory, which opened from that apartment. Into this conservatory Meredith led Christina: and we should observe that it was lighted with lamps—for it had been thrown open in order that the guests might admire the choice exotics, the fruit-trees, and the flowers, which from tropical climes had been transferred thither.

Octavian and Christina were now alone together in the conservatory; and the young maiden, gently disengaging her hand from her companion's arm, glanced for a moment at his countenance, as much as to inquire for what purpose she had been brought hither and what he had to communicate.

"Christina," he said, "I have profited by your own noble example. I will not tell you how much I love you—because—because—I have promised that nothing now shall flow from my lips to which you may not listen. Just now I felt as if there were despair in my heart! I came hither—I reflected by myself—I comprehended you—I knew why you seemed cold to me! It was your duty which you were performing. Ah! and you have awakened me to a sense of mine! Yes, my resolve is taken: every sacrifice shall be made for her who *has* made, and is still making, such immense sacrifices for me! I will not be outdone in generosity—in magnanimity. Christina," he added, in a voice which was tremulous, and so low as to be scarcely audible, "I leave England to-morrow ——I set out to rejoin Zoe!"

"Lord Octavian," replied Christina, scarcely able to keep back the tears which ineffable emotions sent up to the very brims of her eyelids—"you are now performing the noblest part—you are taking the most generous course which you could possibly adopt——and heaven will bless you!"

"Alas! Christina," said Meredith, in a low deep voice, as before, "happiness and duty do not always go hand in hand!"

"Yes—you will be happy, Lord Octavian!" replied Christina, impressively; "because your conscience will tell you that you are acting rightly—and because heaven, which ever succours good intentions, will give you strength to perform your duties thus! You will go to the amiable Zoe—you will rejoin her—you know how deeply and fondly she loves you——"

"Enough, Christina!" interrupted Octavian, now with a gust of vehemence; "speak not thus, or you will deter me from my purpose!"

"Heaven forbid!" cried the young maiden, emphatically. "My lord, in Zoe's name I thank you for this noble resolve that you have adopted. And now let us retire hence."

"What! not another word before we separate, Christina?" said Octavian, again speaking passionately: "no word of hope—no word of promise——"

"My lord," she interrupted him—and it was now with a certain friendliness of manner, blending with true maidenly dignity,—"you have resolved upon a good deed: you are at length doing an act of justice: for heaven's sake mar it not by any weakness or folly now! Let us at once retire, my lord——And if you need one word—yes, just one word—let me bid you rest assured that you shall have my prayers for the welfare and the happiness of yourself and your amiable wife!"

"Christina, you are an angel!" exclaimed Meredith: "you inspire me with courage to do my duty! And believe me it shall be performed!"

Without another word, Lord Octavian gave his arm to Christina, and led her forth from the conservatory. She glanced furtively at his countenance, and perceived that it now had a certain flush upon it—a certain animation, as if arising from the heart's satisfaction at a strongly adopted resolve to perform a sacred, solemn duty. Christina herself was not unhappy: no, she was happy: for perhaps stronger still in *her* mind was the sense of duty; and the self-martyrising heart, when truly pure and virtuous, experiences a bliss in its own sacrifices. They returned to the ball-room; and there Octavian immediately quitted Christina's side. Encountering her brother he shook the youth warmly by the hand, and held him in discourse for a few minutes,—he himself now conversing with a manly calmness and self-possession. Christina subsequently explained to her brother everything that had passed.

Meanwhile Lady Anastatia Latham, bethinking herself of the key of the safe, determined to place it in some drawer or secure nook until she should have an opportunity of restoring it to her husband. She felt for it in her dress: but it was gone. For a few moments she was frightened: she thought she must have left it in the lock of the safe: then she remembered that she felt it in her bosom when about to give it back to Sir Frederick; and next she recalled to mind the circumstance that she had arranged the lace upon the corsage of her dress when seated at the extremity of the room. Thither she repaired: and she found it lying upon the quaintly-chalked floor, close by that chair in which she had sat. She now placed the key in one of the mantel-ornaments,—little suspecting however for what purpose it had served during the interval that it was lost from her possession.

At one o'clock in the morning the supper-rooms were thrown open; and a splendid banquet was given. We however pass over all details of the festive scene, inasmuch as therewith no incident is connected requiring special mention in the pages of our tale. Dancing was resumed after supper: but several of the guests began to take their departure. Foremost amongst them were Christian and Christina. We should observe that Lord Octavian Meredith did not make his appearance at all in the supper-room; and amidst such a number of guests his absence was not noticed by Sir Frederick and Lady Anastatia Latham. Yet he had not quitted the mansion: he had no heart for the festivity—but he still lingered at Tudor House in order to breathe one last farewell in Christina's ear. He seized this opportunity just before her departure with her brother.

"God bless you, Christina!" he said, taking her hand and for a moment pressing it fervidly.

The look that he flung was full of unutterable emotions; and for an instant—but only for an instant—her own courage seemed to be giving way within her. But the next moment it was regained; and she hastily whispered, "Remember, my lord, it is in your power to achieve Zoe's happiness for the remainder of the time that God may permit her to dwell upon this earth."

Christina then quickly turned away; and taking her brother's arm, proceeded with him to the carriage; for their adieux had already been paid to Sir Frederick and Lady Anastatia.

We have said that several of the guests took their departure about the same time, immediately after supper. Amongst these was Viscount Rushbrook: for, contrary to his usual habit, he remained not to take his fill of the delicious wines which were placed upon the board. In spite of his mingled flippancy and recklessness, he felt uneasy: that countenance haunted him—yet dimly, vaguely, and impalpably; for, as we have already said, he had not the slightest idea of the individual's features—no definite notion of the lineaments of that face.

It was Queen Indora's carriage which had brought Christian and Christina to Tudor House; and we must here observe that the groom happening to be ill, the coachman only was in attendance upon the equipage. It was the first carriage to issue from the grounds of Tudor House; and while it was proceeding along, Christina was relating to her brother everything that had passed between herself and Lord Octavian Meredith. All of a sudden the carriage stopped; and the coachman shouted out, "Now then, my man, what is it that you want?"

A rough voice, speaking what appeared to be broken English, implored that whoever might be inside the carriage would give alms to an unfortunate Lascar sailor. The coachman gave vent to an ejaculation of impatience, and was on the very point of urging the horses on again,—when Christian, putting his head out of the window, ordered him to stop a few moments longer while he complied with the mendicant's request. At the same time the false Lascar himself came up to the carriage; and coolly opening the door, began thanking the young gentleman for his liberality. Christian, setting down the fellow's presumption to the account of his ignorance, drew forth his purse; and the chink of gold caught the Lascar's ear. In the twinkling of an eye he snatched the purse from Christian's hand, and darted away with the speed of lightning. Inspired with indignation at this feat, as audacious as it was villanous, Christian sprang from the carriage, and rushed after the false Lascar.

It was in a very lonely part of the road that this incident occurred; and the road itself was too narrow just at that spot for the equipage itself to be turned round in pursuit. The reader will understand that the daring robber had rushed away in the direction from which the carriage had come; and therefore towards Tudor House. Christina screamed as her brother sprang forth: but he was too indignant to think at the moment of her alarm, and too courageous to care for the danger which he might have to encounter. He flew as if on the wings of the wind in pursuit of the Lascar, whom he overtook at a distance of about a hundred yards from the scene of the robbery. The fellow turned round to face his pursuer, at whom he aimed a desperate blow with a large bludgeon which he carried: but Christian, nimbly evading it, at once grasped the bludgeon and closed with the plunderer. So well directed and so irresistible was this attack, that the false Lascar was thrown down; and Christian, wrenching the bludgeon from his hands, hurled it to a distance over one of the high hedges that skirted the road. The prostrate robber endeavoured to gripe our young hero by the throat: but Christian not merely protected himself bravely, but likewise overpowered the Lascar effectually. At that moment the sounds of an advancing equipage were heard: another desperate attempt of the Lascar to free himself was defeated; and finding himself foiled and powerless, he said, in unmistakable vulgar English, "Come, young feller, take your purse back again, and let me go."

But Christian kept him down until the equipage came up to the spot; and it proved to be the dashing phaeton belonging to Lord Rushbrook.

"By heaven! the scoundrel Lascar who robbed me the other night!" ejaculated the Viscount, giving the reins to his groom, and springing into the road.

"He is no Lascar, my lord," said Christian,—"but an English scoundrel in disguise. His speech has just betrayed him."

"Ah! is it you?" exclaimed Rushbrook, now recognising Christian. "By heaven! this is a bold feat which you have evidently performed! Here—let me fasten a hold upon the villain likewise."

Rushbrook, although naturally a coward, was now brave enough when he saw that the work was already done for him; and he took a firm grasp of the Burker's garments: for we need scarcely inform the reader that he was the individual of whom we are speaking. Christian likewise kept hold of him; and they made him get upon his feet.

"Well, I say," growled the Burker, "this is a pretty pickle for an honest chap like me to be placed in. But blow me! if this meeting isn't a queer one!"—then turning to Rushbrook, he added, as he looked him very hard in the face, "What about that there safe and the kesh-box?"

The Viscount's hands suddenly quitted their hold upon the Burker's garments, as if those hands were paralysed; and he staggered back a pace or two. At the same instant, by one desperate jerk, Barney released himself from the hold which Christian Ashton had upon him; and in the twinkling of an eye he had darted right through the hedge with the force of a cannon-ball. Our hero flew after him—but stopped short at the hedge; for it was a barrier which he did not choose to attempt the bursting through after the same fashion as the escaped robber.

"What did he mean, my lord?" demanded Christian, somewhat indignantly, and with still greater astonishment, as he turned towards the nobleman.

"I can't for the life of me understand," replied Rushbrook. "It was a sudden pain which seized upon me——"

"It is excessively provoking," cried our young hero, "after the trouble I took and the risk I incurred. But he said something about a safe and cash-box?"

"Did he?" inquired Rushbrook. "Well, I did not hear him—or at least did not understand. It was a sudden sickness—a dizziness that seized upon me—something at supper which disagreed with me——"

"It is indeed provoking!" ejaculated Christian. "So daring a robbery——"

"He robbed you, then?" ejaculated Rushbrook.

"Of my purse, which contained some twelve or fifteen pounds. For that I care comparatively nothing——but the annoyance of letting the ruffian escape——"

"Well, all I can say, my dear fellow," responded the Viscount, "is that I could not help it; and I am exceedingly sorry for it. I repeat, it was a sudden dizziness that came over me. And I say, be so kind, Mr. Ashton, as to keep the matter a secret: for people are so malicious in this world—they may put a wrong construction on the affair—they may pretend that I was afraid—and I should get unmercifully laughed at——"

"I really have no inclination to say anything

that could annoy your lordship," responded our hero; "and perhaps too I am not altogether satisfied with myself in having let the ruffian go. But what was that ejaculation which burst from your lordship's lips? Had the man robbed you?"

"Did I say so?" asked the Viscount, not being previously aware that in the sudden excitement of the moment he had thus betrayed that incident.

"Why, my lord," said the groom, now speaking for the first time, "it must be the same person drest in white——"

"Ah who *tried* to rob me the other night?" interjected Rushbrook. "That was what I meant! But one's ideas get so confused when anything of this sort happens——"

"Very confused indeed, my lord," said the groom, with a certain dryness which showed he thought that his master was not altogether speaking the truth in some way or another—an impression which Christian likewise entertained, though he could not possibly conceive what motive Rushbrook might have for such prevarication and self-contradiction.

"Well, at all events, Mr. Ashton," said the Viscount, anxious to make an end of the matter, "we agree to keep it secret. And pray, above all things, don't say a word when next you go to Tudor House—for my sister would be frightened out of her wits, and she would not sleep a wink if she knew there were robbers in the neighbourhood. I will give a private hint to the police to-morrow—and that will be sufficient."

Rushbrook ascended into his phaeton; and at this moment, Queen Indora's carriage, having been turned round at some distance ahead, came up to the spot. Christina was rejoiced to find her brother in perfect safety; and on his entering the carriage, he related to her everything that had occurred. They both agreed that there was something peculiar and unaccountable in Lord Rush-

brook's conduct: but it was impossible to conjecture the motive thereof.

On reaching London, the carriage put down Christian in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square; and thence proceeded with Christina to Queen Indora's villa at Bayswater.

CHAPTER CXXIV.

UNCONSCIOUS REVELATIONS.

Let us see what in the meantime had been taking place at the Queen's villa. Her Majesty—having seen Christina off in the carriage, which was to take up her brother in Mortimer Street and bear the twins to the grand entertainment at Balham Hill—returned to the chamber in which lay the wounded Sagoonah. The ayah had for a week continued perfectly unconscious of the attentions bestowed upon her; and though Indora had no doubt as to some mischievous design having been harboured by her Hindoo dependant, she relaxed not from those ministrations which in the purest spirit of Christian goodness were bestowed. And there lay the guilty ayah, pillowed in a luxurious couch, with her queenly mistress watching every variation of her countenance—applying a cooling beverage to her lips when they appeared to be dry with feverish thirst—and devoting as much sedulous care to the wounded female as if she were a beloved sister whom Indora was endeavouring to snatch from the grasp of death.

Seated upon a small ottoman by the side of that couch, Indora fell into a profound reverie, as she gazed upon the sleeping countenance of the ayah.

"And is it possible, Sagoonah," she thus inwardly apostrophized the unconscious invalid—"is it possible that you could have been culpable of so much dissimulation and of so much wickedness? Methought that you loved me—that you sincerely sympathized with me in all I myself felt and suffered at the time you agreed to accompany me from our far-off Indian home to this western clime. But, ah! you cherished a passion for *him* whom I also loved, and whom I shall ever love so tenderly and so well! I remember a while ago—one night when I was expecting him to call at the villa—that I spoke to you, Sagoonah, on the subject of love: I asked if you had ever loved—and I fancied that you were happy in your supposed ignorance of love's pangs. But at that very time you loved him——Oh! you loved him!—and how you dissembled! Well, well, do I know, Sagoonah, that the human heart has no power over its volition; and it cannot shield itself against the impressions or the images which by destiny's decree are to affix themselves upon it. Nevertheless, Sagoonah, there are duties which in such a case are to be performed; and those duties were *not* performed by you! No—for you should have told me the truth, and I should not have blamed you——I should have pitied you. Yes—you should have told me the truth; and you should not have accompanied me from India. But you yielded to your own infatuation: you were selfish—you were egotistical; and in thee I have been cherishing a reptile who sought to sting me, instead of a faithful dependant to soothe and comfort me. I gave you my confidence, Sagoonah—I told you all my love for him! At one time I explained my hopes—at another my fears: seldom did I conceal from you my intentions; and all the while you were a traitress and a hypocrite!"

Indora heaved a profound sigh as she reached this point in her musings; and so deeply were her feelings touched, that tears trickled down her cheeks. Her heart was generous—her soul magnanimous; and as she had embraced the Christian faith, so did she possess the purest Christain sympathies. Thus, even while musingly addressing her reproaches to the unconscious Sagoonah, she felt inclined to pity her as the victim of an infatuated and hopeless love.

"Ought I really to blame you thus?" continued the Queen, still pensively apostrophizing the sleeping ayah; "or ought I not rather to look for as much extenuation on your behalf as circumstances admit? For, Oh! I myself know what the power of love is—what its impulses are—and how selfish it at times renders its votaries. My own life affords an illustration: and it is the only deed on which I have to look back with sorrow. Yes—for it was I who kept *him* so long a prisoner in that far-off kingdom of Inderabad; and it was cruel—it was selfish—it was unjust—it was barbarous, on my part! If I therefore have to retrospect with compunction upon such a deed as *that*, ought I not to be lenient in the judgment which I pass upon thee, Sagoonah?"

Here the Queen's musings were suddenly interrupted by a restless movement on Sagoonah's part: she tossed her arms uneasily, and turned her head upon the pillow, as if she suffered pain either physically or mentally—perhaps in both ways. The Queen rose from her seat and hastened to quiet the invalid. She took Sagoonah's hands in her own: she pressed them: then she passed one of her hands caressingly and soothingly over the smooth dusky-hued cheek of the ayah; and then she assured herself that the bandages of the healing wound were not disturbed. While thus tenderly ministering to her dependant, Queen Indora completely lost sight of whatsoever motives of dark misgiving and deep resentment she had against the sleeping woman: it was only the invalid requiring all her attentions that she at the moment beheld. And if anything were wanting to afford a complete illustration of the admirable qualities of Indora's character, this deficiency was now supplied by the unfeigned sincerity and unalloyed tenderness of her behaviour towards one who had proved her enemy.

Sagoonah appeared to have felt the soothing influence of her kind mistress's caresses, though mentally unconscious that they were bestowed; for she relapsed into a state of composure. The Queen was gently resuming her seat, when it struck her that some words were wavering upon Sagoonah's lips. She stopped short, and listened. Yes: the ayah was murmuring something; and this was the first time that a syllable had issued from those lips during the week which had now elapsed since the almost mortal wound was inflicted. It was evident that Sagoonah's consciousness was returning—and that as the lamp of life was regaining its power, it was beginning to light up the images and impressions that were most strongly marked in the cells of Sagoonah's brain.

Statue-like did Indora stand close by the couch —with upheaved bosom breathlessly listening to whatsoever might first coherently come from Sagoonah's lips. Again did the ayah move her arms, as if with a feverish uneasiness; and the Queen was about to soothe her with the mesmeric influence of caresses again, when the ayah spoke intelligibly and plainly, though feebly and in broken words.

"Yes—I did it all!—the wickedness was mine!" she thus murmuringly said. "But it was that fiend — the Frenchwoman — who prompted me! Oh, why did I listen to her? For all the plotting was against my dear good mistress—my mistress ——the plotting——Indora——my mistress!"

Now Sagoonah opened her large dark eyes: she almost immediately closed them again; and for a few instants it appeared as if she were dead, so breathlessly silent did she lie. The Queen was alarmed, and placed her hand upon Sagoonah's bosom: but the heart was beating within. Again did the ayah slowly open her eyes, and look up vacantly at the countenance that was bending over her. Thus for upwards of a minute did she gaze at her royal mistress; and when she closed her eyes again, it was without any sudden glitter to show that she had recognised the countenance which thus bent over her. But once more did her tongue give utterance to feebly articulated and broken sentences; and once more did the Queen listen with breathless attention.

"Yes—it was that fiend the Frenchwoman—Madame Angelique," continued Sagoonah, "who did it all. Ah! that night—when I penetrated into the Queen's chamber—the intent was horrible—it was to take her life! Christina saved her! Yes—the English girl saved my mistress on that occasion—or she would have been dead, dead!"

There was another long interval of silence, during which Indora listened in a state of dismayed and horrified suspense for whatsoever might next come from Sagoonah's lips.

"Ah! that temptress—that vile, vile woman!" again murmured Sagoonah: "it was she who urged me on!—Oh!" and here the ayah shuddered visibly, and with a violence that shook the very bed beneath her, "how could I have touched that reptile? Its fangs might have entered my flesh!—its venom might have circulated in my veins! Ah, my poor mistress!—that day you took me to the gardens—the gardens—the—the——"

The rest of the sentence was lost in incoherent murmurings: but Sagoonah had said enough to send a light horribly flashing in unto the brain of the Queen, clearing up in a moment the mystery of that serpent's presence within the walls of the villa some little while back. Indora was shocked —appalled: the revelation was as frightful as it was unexpected. Sagoonah, conscience-stricken even in her unconsciousness, was thus giving a species of subdued delirious vent to the terrific incidents of guilt which weighed upon her soul.

"The messengers from India came at the moment," continued the ayah, in the same murmuring broken accents as before: "the reptile was in the couch—all was prepared—death was in its sting—venom in its fangs: but heaven would not permit my mistress to perish *then!* Take it from me—take it from me, that hideous reptile!—Oh, take it, take it from me! Oh, oh!"

Again was Sagoonah's form convulsed with a violent shudder: the bed shook under her—she writhed upon the couch—she half-turned round in spasmodic convulsion: again were her arms tossed and agitated wildly. This time Indora had not the presence of mind to apply her soothing influence: she was transfixed to the spot with the horror that like a night-mare filled her soul. This last revelation from Sagoonah's lips, in respect to the cobra di capello, was so frightfully incredible—and yet all circumstances combined to prevent it from being for a single moment disbelieved!

"That English girl—Christina Ashton," continued Sagoonah, in feebler and more broken accents than those in which she had last spoken, "is an angel in earthly form! She has told me of the angels of her creed—and she is one——she has spoken of herself! She is the Good Genius of my mistress: her presence is a talisman against all evil to Indora. No, no, vile woman!——no, no, Madame Angelique! I will do nothing more to Indora! Christina's presence saves her. Fool! you carry her off—but she comes back—she escapes from your toils—she is an angel—an angel of her own creed! Nor can you dispose of her as you will——that angel—that angel——angel!"

Here was another revelation for the Queen: the mystery of Christina's forced abduction was now cleared up.

"Yes, Christina escaped from you, vile woman!" continued Sagoonah: "she came back—to be the Good Genius of my mistress, who is kind to her! Oh, I will do no more to Indora! But that Englishman—the first whom I ever saw—the only one whom I ever loved——Ah! his image is here—here——*here!*"

Sagoonah turned uneasily upon her pillow; and with a low gasping sigh she laid her right hand upon her heart. Again she opened her large dark eyes; and she appeared to look slowly around with the vacant astonishment, half-dismayed and half-inquiring, of a young child who awakens in a strange bed and in a strange room. Indora bent over Sagoonah to see if she would be recognised: but the lids closed gradually, and with an air of heaviness, upon the ayah's eyes: the long ebon lashes again resting upon the dusky paleness of the cheeks. There was another interval of silence, during which Sagoonah appeared to sleep in profoundest tranquillity,—until her bosom began slowly to heave with one long deep-drawn sigh, and more words wavered murmuringly upon her lips.

"No, not love!—it is hatred now!" she said; "hatred, because he loves another!—hatred because he will not accept *my* love! Oh, wretched, wretched Sagoonah, to appeal to him in vain—to entreat and to threaten in turns—and all so fruitlessly! And *he* so cold, so reserved, so distant—— Aye, and even so disdainful! But I will be avenged! I will leave this house, never to return!—Ah! my mistress has jewels and gold—I may be rich—poverty shall not clutch me with its long, lean, withered hands,—nor hover round me with its gaunt, squalid, emaciated form! Away, away to a magistrate!—let the blow be struck at once—a double blow—a blow that shall crush *him* and overwhelm *her* with despair! Yes—a blow that shall destroy both at once! There has already been too much of love: the time has come for hatred. But, no! not in this white dress of mine

which marks the slave! Who will believe me? Then what am I to do? Ah, happy thought! apparel myself in the Queen's raiment—become a lady at once—go richly dressed into the presence of the magistrate—and then, *then* he will believe me!"

It was thus that Sagoonah re-enacted in her conscience-stricken unconsciousness — and in the fever of her half-subdued, half-hushed delirium—that last scene which had entailed upon her so frightful a result. Indora continued to listen with breathless attention, but with dismayed and horrified feelings. Everything was now revealed to her:—had Sagoonah made a regular and intentional confession, it could not have been more explicit, nor could its details have been more lucidly defined. The Queen saw that for some time past she had indeed been cherishing a serpent who sought to sting her: she had been standing upon a mine to which the hand of the false Sagoonah was at any moment to apply the torch; and she was horrified—she was astounded in one sense—but in another how grateful was she! And there—by the side of that couch on which the guilty woman lay, now silently sleeping once more—Indora knelt; and in the fervour of her Christian piety she poured forth her thanksgiving to the true God whom by Clement Redcliffe she had been taught to worship. Nothing more came that night from the lips of Sagoonah; and Queen Indora retired to rest in an adjoining room. Frequently, however, during the night did this royal lady rise to see that the nurse who in the meanwhile had taken her place, was doing her duty towards the invalid: for notwithstanding that Indora had now obtained the complete reading of the whole sum of Sagoonah's monstrous iniquity, yet not for an instant would she neglect that being whom her own kind cares had saved from dissolution.

The Queen heard Christina return home in the carriage; and she could scarcely restrain herself from hastening at once to tell the young lady how all the mysteries of Sagoonah's wickedness were cleared up, and how the motive of Christina's forced abduction at the time was now thoroughly comprehended. But Indora resolved to wait until the morning; for she knew that Miss Ashton must feel fatigued after the entertainment from which she had returned so late.

The Queen did not suffer her young friend to be disturbed until she herself rang the bell for the maid shortly after nine o'clock in the morning; and then Indora, who was already up, proceeded to Christina's chamber.

"My dear girl," she said, "there are many topics upon which I have never spoken to you much, or at which I have only lightly glanced: but it is now suitable that you should know more of those subjects."

With this brief preface, the Queen proceeded to explain to the horrified and amazed Christina how Sagoonah in her uneasy slumbers avowed sufficient to prove with what murderous intention she was inspired, when penetrating one night into her chamber,—adding, "And it was you, my sweet Christina, who were my guardian angel at the time! Yes—Sagoonah herself has declared that you are an angel!"

The Queen then recited the ayah's unconscious confession relative to the cobra di capello, and also in respect to Christina's forcible abduction by the infamous Frenchwoman. But Indora said nothing relative to that portentous secret which regarded Clement Redcliffe, and which Sagoonah had intended to use as the means of dealing a blow of twofold vindictiveness. To all however that *was* told her, the young maiden listened with those feelings of blended horror and wonderment which such revelations were but too well calculated to excite; and as she threw herself into the Queen's arms, weeping and sobbing, she murmured, "Oh, dear lady! it has been heaven's own hand that has guided you safely amidst so many and such frightful perils!"

In the course of the forenoon Mr. Redcliffe called; and Indora communicated to him everything that had issued from the lips of Sagoonah on the preceding evening.

"Rest assured, my dear Indora," said Mr. Redcliffe, "that all the affairs in which I am in any way mixed up, are gradually but surely approaching a crisis. When any circumstances which it so deeply concerns an individual to bring to an issue, are thus unravelling themselves—when past mysteries are being cleared up as if by means simply accidental—and when a clearer insight is afforded into whatsoever was previously dark and uncertain,—rest assured, I say, that the end is not far distant. Have no fears for the result: I myself am full of confidence! My plans are working:—day by day are the meshes tightening in around those whom it is necessary or expedient to involve in such toils, and to place completely at my mercy; and the further I proceed, the clearer, the easier, and the more certain becomes the path which I have to pursue. Beware, however, lest Sagoonah should speak in the presence of that nurse——"

"I have taken every precaution," responded the Queen. "I have purposely told sufficient to Christina to render that amiable girl interested in watching Sagoonah's bedside at those times when I myself cannot be there; and the very instant that words begin to waver on Sagoonah's lips, the nurse will be dismissed from the chamber. Besides, as Christina takes her turn with me in thus watching, there is so little need for the presence of the nurse at all!"

The Queen and Mr. Redcliffe continued to discourse for some little while longer; and then the latter took his leave—he having business of importance to attend to in respect to the various plans which he had in operation. Christian called in the forenoon; and after spending a couple of hours at the villa, he hastened away to see his dearly beloved Isabella Vincent.

It was six o'clock in the evening—dinner was over at the villa—and the Queen said to Christina, "You have not been out to-day, my dear girl—and your cheeks are somewhat pale after last night's entertainment. Go and take an hour's ramble in the garden or in the neighbourhood—so that you may return revivified and refreshed, to give me your kind assistance in watching by the side of Sagoonah's couch."

Christina, intending to confine her ramble to the garden, threw on a large summer straw-hat, and issued forth from the villa. She had caught up a volume of poems before leaving her room; and on passing out into the garden, she endeavoured to fix her attention upon the book—but she could not.

Her cheek was indeed pale, as the Queen had noticed: but this pallor was not the effect of the entertainment only. The young maiden had been thinking of all that took place between herself and Lord Octavian on the preceding night; and though not for a single instant did she regret the line of conduct she had pursued, yet she could not help feeling the influence of those occurrences. She loved one who was the husband of another; and with all her sense of duty it was impossible to stifle and crush this love in her heart. Yet there was a serenity, if not an actual happiness, in Christina's thoughts, when pondering the intention of Lord Octavian to rejoin his wife, the amiable Zoe.

Christina felt as if the air of the garden did not do her any good—as if it wanted that elasticity and freshness which could alone benefit her; and opening the gate, she passed into the road. Thence she turned into a lane at a little distance; and along this well-shaded narrow avenue she rambled with the book in her hand, but with her thoughts fixed on subjects far different from its contents. Be it recollected that it is the month of September of which we are writing. The day had been sultry—it had left a portion of its heaviness in the evening atmosphere; and this was the reason why Christina had fancied that the air in the garden had been deficient in elasticity.

She was proceeding along the lane, when all of a sudden she heard footsteps behind her, preceded by a sound as if of some one bursting through the hedge; and on looking back our heroine found herself confronted by a figure that filled her with a sudden terror. The aspect of the individual was alone sufficient to strike her with this dismay: but it was all the greater when the conviction rushed in unto her mind that she beheld before her the ruffian of the previous night's adventure. The Lascar's dress was just the same as it struck Christina to be when the fellow, having opened the door of the carriage, snatched the purse from her brother's hand,—the same too as he subsequently described it to her. We need hardly add that the wretch was the Burker: but it may be proper to observe that he now at once recognised Christina—for he had seen her walking in the Queen's garden at the time he was on the watch to consummate his murderous purpose.

For a few moments Christina's tongue was paralyzed with dismay; and she could not give vent to the scream which rose up in her throat. The Burker, who carried a bludgeon in his hand, burst out into a coarse chuckling laugh—and said, "You're an uncommon pretty gal; and it would be a sin to frighten you. Come, young Miss—just hand us over your purse, as well as that there gold watch and chain—and there's nuffin more to be said."

Christina swept her eyes up and down the lane: but no one was to be seen except the ruffian who stood before her; and the nearest houses were too far off to be reached by a scream if she sent one pealing forth from her lips. She was frightened—she was dismayed: the Burker grew impatient—and in a still more savage tone than that in which he had before spoken, he exclaimed, "Out with the purse! off with the chain!—or by jingo I'll help myself!"

The imprecation was however more terrible than the comparatively moderate one which we have inserted in its place; and Christina was sinking with terror, when it struck her that she heard the sounds of a horse's hoofs at a distance. Inspired by the hope of aid, she darted away from the spot, but the ruffian was immediately at her heels—and in a few moments he violently seized her by her dress. Her screams rang forth as she struggled desperately with the miscreant; and all of a sudden a horseman appeared round the corner of a diverging lane. The Burker's ear had not caught the same sounds which had heralded this approach of succour to that of Christina; and he was suddenly stricken with alarm on beholding this unexpected appearance. For he in a moment recognised the horseman—although the latter recognised not him in that Lascar garb which he wore.

Up to the spot the horseman rode: he sprang from his steed; and the Burker, who had let go his hold upon Christina, aimed a tremendous blow with his club at the young maiden's champion. The latter dexterously avoided it—and sprang forward to grapple with the ruffian,—when the last-mentioned individual thought it better not to hazard a conflict; and rushing through the hedge, as he had done on the preceding night, he disappeared from the view of Christina and her deliverer.

The young maiden was sinking with terror; for at one moment she had fancied that murder's work would be done, and that nothing could save her champion from the fury of the blow dealt against him. Her deliverer now turned towards her; and with the most gentlemanly courtesy he spoke a few reassuring words. Then he hastened to pick up her straw hat which had come off, as well as her book and her parasol which she had dropped in her fright. The horse meanwhile had remained upon the spot, although its rider had let the bridle go; and the animal was now feeding on the grass by the side of the lane.

Christina expressed her gratitude in suitable terms; and feeling full of confusion on account of the dishevelled state of her hair and the disordered condition of her toilet, the blood came back to those cheeks which an instant before were pale with terror. Her deliverer was struck by her extraordinary beauty, though there was nothing disrespectful in his gaze: on the contrary his entire manner and conduct were marked by the kindest and most polished courtesy. He was a young man—a little past four-and-twenty years of age—exceedingly handsome—and evidently belonging to the best sphere of society. He now turned aside under pretence of looking after his horse, but in reality to give Christina an opportunity of arranging her hair and restoring her toilet. This the young maiden hastily did; and when her deliverer again turned towards her, it was still with blushes but with more self-possession than at first, that she renewed the expression of her thanks for the service he had rendered her.

"Do not think the less of my courage," said the gentleman, smiling,—"or rather perhaps I ought to entreat that you will not tax me with cowardice in not pursuing the ruffian: but it was entirely through the fear that you were overcome by your alarm and might need prompt assistance."

"It would be impossible, sir," replied Christina, "to harbour a thought so ungenerous, so unfounded,

and so insulting towards one who has served me so signally."

The young gentleman bowed in acknowledgment of this assurance; and then said, "I presume that you reside in this neighbourhood?"

"At a distance of about a mile," answered Christina.

"You will permit me to escort you as far as your dwelling?" said her new acquaintance: "for it is quite possible that villanous Lascar may be loitering about in the neighbourhood."

Christina gladly and thankfully accepted the proffered courtesy: her deliverer threw the bridle over his arm and walked by the horse's side, so that he might keep better companionship with Christina.

"You are deceived, sir," she said, "as to that man, although it is very natural you should be guided by appearances. He is not a Lascar—but some English robber in disguise."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the stranger with astonishment.

"Yes, it is as I tell you," rejoined Christina. "He robbed my brother last night as we were returning from a party: there was a conflict—a struggle—but, to be brief, the man escaped."

Christina's companion surveyed the young lady with the utmost interest while she spoke; and yet he had sufficient command over his feeling of admiration to prevent it from bordering upon rudeness. He thought he had never seen any one so exquisitely beautiful as she by whose side he was now walking. Her countenance, her figure, her looks, her manners—the silvery tones of her voice—all formed a combination of charms and attractions that ravished his heart. He longed to know more of her, and to improve his acquaintance with one who thus in a few minutes had made so deep an impression upon him. But all the while Christina herself was perfectly unaware that her blended beauty and modesty had inspired her companion with so much interest on her behalf.

He now inquired the exact particulars of what had occurred between herself and the robber. The details were not long: but as Christina gave them, her deliverer drank in the sounds of her voice as if they were those of a delicious music. When she had done speaking, he proceeded to give her to understand that he was an officer in the army—that he was on leave of absence from his regiment—and that he was temporarily staying with some friends at Kensington. He congratulated himself on the fortunate occurrence of having taken an evening ride in that particular direction; and he concluded by intimating that his name was Captain Stanley.

Immediately struck with this name, Christina glanced rapidly towards her companion—and said, "Might I ask whether your father is Sir William Stanley who resides near Liverpool?"

"The same!" cried the Captain, both overjoyed and astonished at this species of recognition on the part of the beautiful young lady whose acquaintance he was so anxious to cultivate. "But how is it possible——"

"I have heard Mr. Redcliffe speak of you," replied Christina, thus anticipating the question.

"Mr. Redcliffe!—that kind generous man!" exclaimed Captain Stanley: "as brave too as he is kind—for he saved my father's life amidst the jungles of India!"

"Mr. Redcliffe is a kind friend of mine," rejoined Christina: "my brother lives with him altogether. I myself am residing with an Eastern lady of rank and wealth; and our habitation is yonder villa."

"Rejoiced as I at first was," said Captain Stanley, "in having been enabled by circumstances to render assistance to a young lady, even while believing her a total stranger,—infinitely more delighted am I now on finding that we are not altogether unknown to each other. I only arrived in town yesterday; and it was my intention to call on Mr. Redcliffe to-morrow. Perhaps—perhaps," added the Captain hesitatingly, "I may venture likewise to call at your residence, to assure myself that you will in the meantime have perfectly recovered from the alarm produced by this incident."

All the rules of politeness as well as the additional ones of gratitude prevented Christina from giving a negative response to this request; and with artless candour she said, "If you do me the honour of calling, Captain Stanley, the Lady Indora with whom I live will personally express her thanks for the service you have rendered one for whom she cherishes a sisterly affection."

This portion of the dialogue took place in the road from which the lane diverged; and the gate of the villa was now in sight. Scarcely had the young maiden given the answer just placed upon record, when a gentleman on horseback was seen rapidly approaching; and Christina at once recognised Lord Octavian Meredith. She instantaneously became aware of the necessity of maintaining all her fortitude, her firmness, and her feminine dignity: for the conviction smote her that he was there, in that neighbourhood, to seek an interview with herself—perhaps a parting one—before he fulfilled his promise by going abroad to rejoin Zoe. Captain Stanley did not notice that anything peculiar had at the moment transpired to startle his fair companion: for she was indeed startled for a single instant on recognising Lord Octavian. As for his lordship himself, he suddenly drew in his bridle and brought his steed to a halt at a distance of about twenty yards from Christina and Captain Stanley: then, the next moment, he abruptly wheeled round his horse and galloped away.

"That gentleman appears to have taken the wrong road," observed the Captain, utterly unsuspicious of how well Christina was acquainted with him; "and he has only this instant perceived his mistake."

"Perhaps so," said the young maiden, scarcely knowing what she did say: for all her self-possession abandoned her as a sudden thought flashed in unto her brain.

Was it possible that Meredith could have fancied she was walking with a rival?—that it was a suitor for her hand whom he beheld in her company, and who with the familiarity of intimacy had dismounted from his horse in order that he might the more conveniently and agreeably enjoy the pleasures of discourse? Innocent and artless though Christina were, yet no young lady of her age could be so utterly inexperienced in the ways of the world as not at once to perceive how naturally and even reasonably a suspicion of that sort might strike the mind of Lord Octavian Meredith.

The gate of the villa was now reached; and Captain Stanley said, with a polite bow, "I will do myself the pleasure of calling to-morrow. But you have not honoured me by saying for whom I am to inquire?"

"This is the Lady Indora's villa," answered Christina; "and I am Miss Ashton."

"Good evening, Miss Ashton," rejoined Captain Stanley; and springing upon his horse, he rode away from the spot.

Christina's feelings had been suddenly and powerfully wrung by the incident in respect to Lord Octavian Meredith. She had no unmaidenly desire for the young nobleman to be convinced that she loved him: but on the other hand she was averse to the idea that he should suppose she had been favouring the suit of another. For she saw at once that supposing it to be really the case that she had thus favoured another suit, and if it were indeed a reality that her heart or her hand was engaged elsewhere,—she ought at once to have mentioned the circumstance on the preceding evening at Tudor House as the best means of silencing the allusions to his own love which were made by Lord Octavian. She perceived that *he*, putting his own construction on the fact of her being with a handsome young gentleman, as Captain Stanley was, would naturally conclude that she had acted coquettishly, capriciously, and even immodestly in not having told him on the previous night that her heart was engaged to another. The idea of all this was most repugnant to the pure notions and delicate feelings of our amiable heroine.

On passing into the grounds attached to the villa, Christina felt so annoyed and distressed that she could not immediately enter the house. If she did, she would be courting questions on the part of the Queen—questions which might turn upon a topic that she did not like to approach. Therefore, to compose her thoughts and collect her self-possession, Christina rambled through the garden. It is but the strictest justice to our heroine to declare most positively and unreservedly that she had not the slightest anticipation of what was to follow: or else not for worlds would she have placed herself in a position to encounter it. Twice had she slowly made a tour of the garden—for the third time was she taking the round, with the intention of entering the villa when this last stroll was completed. She reached that extremity which joined the field—the point that was remotest from the house, and was most enveloped in the shade of the umbrageous trees—the spot, in a word, where Sagoonah's interviews had been wont to take place with Madame Angelique—Christina had reached that spot, we say, when there was a sudden rustling amongst the evergreens, and Lord Octavian Meredith stood before her.

All in a moment our heroine's fullest self-possession came to her aid: all her dignity was summoned up; and what she had last been thinking of in connexion with the previous incident, was absorbed in that of wounded pride, bordering on resentment, that the young nobleman should thus seek her after his solemn promise at Tudor Lodge. He himself was ashy pale, but labouring under a deep concentrated inward excitement: his white lips were compressed—his arms were folded across his breast—he stood confronting her with the air of one who sought an explanation, was determined to have it, and fancied that he had a perfect right to demand it.

"We meet, Christina," he said, "for the last time:"—and his voice sounded unnatural in its lowness and hollowness.

"Our meeting of last night, my lord," responded Christina firmly, "should have no sequence. Remember your pledge—and you have broken it!"

"Listen to me—listen to me but for an instant!" he said, with such concentrated vehemence that he seemed as if scarcely able to restrain the outbreak of feelings tremendously agitated. "Circumstances would not permit me to depart until to-morrow; and I could not resist the temptation of riding round into this neighbourhood—for accident made me aware of the place of your abode, which I never knew till this morning. I met Sir Frederick Latham, and he spoke of you. That was how I learnt your place of residence. I did not mean to seek an interview with you—I respected my pledge—I intended to observe it——God knows," he added bitterly "it is more than ever my intention to keep it *now*, after what I have seen!"

"What you have seen, my lord?" exclaimed Christina, indignantly: and then, the next moment, she was half suffocated by the feelings which surged up into her throat: but she held back the words to which they would have prompted her to give utterance, for she was suddenly smitten with the conviction that it would be more dangerous and unmaidenly to vindicate herself by explanations than to allow Lord Octavian to remain under the impression which he had received from his own construction of the recent incident on the road.

"I tell you, Christina," he exclaimed, vehemently, "that I did not mean to seek an interview with you! I considered our parting of last night to be final——and heaven knows the pang it cost me to breathe that word *farewell!* But I could not resist the temptation of riding round here to catch a glimpse of your home—of the place where you dwell. Oh, if I had foreseen—— But it is better thus! it is better thus!" he passionately ejaculated: and yet he made a movement as if to stamp his foot with maddened rage.

"Yes, it is better thus, my lord," said Christina, who in endeavouring to entrench herself with a becoming feminine dignity, in reality became surrounded with a reserve that was not merely cold, but even had the air of haughty defiance.

At least so Meredith thought; and the idea was natural in his own morbid state of feeling. He therefore said with a tone and look of bitterest reproach, "You feel that you have dealt ungenerously with me—heartlessly—coquettishly; and you take refuge within the circle of your own haughty pride. You may tell me that I have no claim upon you—and you are right; for I am another's! You may tell me likewise that you are the mistress of your own actions, and that you owe no account of them to me: and again you will be right! But, Oh! Christina, had you for an instant been candid with me—had you suffered me to know when last we met——I do not mean last night—but the other day when I rescued you from the persons who were carrying you off——had you told me *then* that your heart was engaged to another——because it must have been so even *then*—for this attachment of your's cannot be merely

of to-day——Oh! Christina, you would have awakened me from a dream—you would have aroused me to my senses! But no, no—you did it not! I told you that I loved you—you knew it—I even went so far as to declare that all my hopes of happiness were concentrated in the idea—the *one* idea that you might yet become my own adored and cherished wife; and you did not tell me that you loved another! It is true that you answered me with what methought was a becoming maiden dignity—and I loved you all the more tenderly for it. But still there was something in your manner, Christina, which at that time bade me hope——"

"No, my lord—no!" vehemently interrupted the young maiden, who had hitherto listened with the reader may conceive how much distress and anguish of mind to that long and passionately delivered speech, which was full of accusations that her sense of maidenly propriety would not permit her to explain away.

"Oh, but it was so, Christina!" exclaimed Meredith, terribly excited. "But if not *then*, what of last night? Think you that when the first word of allusion to this maddening, despairing love of mine had fallen from my lips,—think you, I ask, whether my speech would not have been checked if you, with that candour which I fancied you to possess, had at once told me that you loved another? Oh! Christina, it was not well of you. My God! how much have I suffered on your account!—and to be rewarded thus! If you loved me not, it was your duty to proclaim that fact. To keep it back, was to bid me hope! It was worse,—it was playing the part of a coquette!—it was heartless—it was wrong!"

Overwhelmed with these reproaches—half-believing them to be just so long as Meredith remained under his present impressions in respect to the circumstances of her being seen with Captain Stanley—half-resentful, on the other hand, at the bitter accusations thus hurled against her—yearning to explain everything, yet daring not to pronounce the words "I do not love another," for fear they should be taken as the avowal of "I love you,"—distressed and bewildered—wanting to say something, yet knowing not what to say—anxious to fly from the spot, yet transfixed there by the power of her feelings,—Christina leant against a tree for support; and the tears flowed thick and fast from her eyes.

"Oh! now you weep," exclaimed Meredith. "Weep on, false-hearted girl! An hour ago every tear you are at present shedding would have fallen like a drop of molten lead upon my heart, and I should have gone mad with grief! But now it does me good to see you weep, and to know that I have wrung those tears from your eyes! Ah, I envy not the man who will conduct *you* to the altar, deceiver that you are! Until within the hour that is passing, I would have staked my soul on your candour—your truthfulness! My God, how I should have been deceived! It would have been selling this soul of mine to Satan—and *you*, perfidious girl, the cause! Ah, though I am married—and it was as a married man that I dared love you, Christina—you know not the heart with which you have trifled, and which you have broken! Yet I will not curse you——No! ten thousand times no! I bless you, Christina!—and may God grant you with another all that happiness which, if circumstances permitted, it would have been my pride and joy to ensure you!"

The young nobleman made a hasty movement as if to turn abruptly away. Christina, on her part, made a movement as if about to speak: but she could not give utterance to a word. *His* excitement was moderating into a profound mournfulness: *her* distress and anguish of mind were rising into a terrible excitement.

"Yet one word more!" he said, for an instant arresting his own steps; "and I have done! Forgive me that I blamed you—pardon me that I reproached you! I have been too vehement—too impetuous! I was wrong, Christina,—I was wrong! But my feelings hurried me away. Once more—and for the last time, do I pray heaven to award you its blessing! Yes—may you be happy and blest!"

With these words Lord Octavian disappeared from Christina's presence. She started forward: his name was at the very tip of her tongue: she was about to call him back: but with such an effort of fortitude as only the purest-minded and most virtuous being could have commanded under such circumstances, she restrained herself—the name was not spoken—and he reappeared *not* in her presence.

"Yes—it is better as it is," thought Christina to herself. "Let him fancy that I love another!—it will all the more easily wean him from that infatuation which has well nigh produced such fatal effects upon the amiable Zoe!"

And now, in a frame of mind that was fraught with a marvellous calmness—with all the pious resignation of a self-sacrificing, self-martyrising spirit—Christina Ashton re-entered the villa.

Lord Octavian Meredith hastened homeward, riding as if he were a madman mounted upon a mad steed. On gaining the more frequented parts of the town, he dashed amidst the vehicles with a recklessness which made every one who beheld him think that he was intoxicated with wine. Nevertheless, he reached his home in safety. Springing from his horse, he tossed the bridle to the domestic, who was half astonished and half frightened at his master's appearance: but Meredith saw not the effect which his strangely wild excitement produced. He rushed into the house: he summoned his valet, and gave immediate orders for his clothes to be packed up and for the carriage to be got in readiness, as he intended to start by the night train for Dover. The valet was as astonished as the other domestic had been; and yet he knew his master too well to suppose for an instant that he had been drinking. He therefore thought that some sudden calamity, or else some serious indiscretion, must have driven Lord Octavian Meredith to the resolve of this precipitate departure. In order to lead Octavian, if possible, into conversation, the valet inquired, with every appearance of completest deference, whether his lordship did not intend to see Mr. Armitage before he took his departure?

"No—it is not necessary!" replied Meredith petulantly. "I will leave a note, to be sent to him to-morrow. Hasten you to get everything in readiness: prepare your own things likewise, for you will accompany me."

Having thus spoken, Octavian hastened to the

drawing-room, where he sat down and penned a few lines to Mr. Armytage. He simply said that being alarmed on account of Zoe's health, and considering that he was not doing his duty in allowing her thus to remain separated from him, he was about to rejoin her with the least possible delay. He then thought of writing a few last words to Christina: but he could pen nothing that satisfied him. Sheet after sheet did he tear up: and when the valet entered to announce that everything was ready for immediate departure, Lord Octavian was still commencing a new epistle, and still too without any satisfaction to himself. This last sheet of paper he therefore tore into fragments, like the former ones; and speeding down the stairs, he sprang into the carriage.

Now he gave full vent to the excitement which was torturing him:—he covered his face with his hands—he burst into an agony of weeping: he sobbed like a woman or a child.

"O Christina, Christina!" he murmured, in a broken voice: "to think that you could have loved another!"

The unhappy young nobleman proceeded to Dover: on the following day he passed over to Boulogne; and thence he journeyed with all possible despatch, to rejoin that wife whom he was now seeking in the frenzy of desperation rather than under the influence of a pure unalloyed sense of duty.

CHAPTER CXXV.

THE DESK.

It was the second morning after the brilliant entertainment at Tudor House—breakfast was over—Anastatia had retired to her boudoir for a while—

and the great merchant had sought his study to look over his letters, it not being his purpose to visit the City on this particular day. Not another syllable had been spoken by Sir Frederick Latham relative to that incident of the ball-night which had led him to entrust the key of the safe to his wife; and she on her own side had felt no inclination to revive the topic. The merchant fancied that Anastatia had been extravagant in some respect, and had therefore contracted a debt which she chose not to mention to him: he congratulated himself on the policy he had pursued: instead of chiding and reproaching, he had acted with magnanimity; and he naturally concluded that the effect of such conduct would be more salutary and would be all the better appreciated, than if he had displayed anger and irritation. On the other hand Anastatia—though having been scandalously plundered by Madame Angelique, and therefore really innocent of any extravagance involving her in debt—was fully conscious that she laboured under a suspicion of an opposite character; and she was compelled to bear the imputation of extravagance because she dared not enter upon explanations which would reveal the whole truth. She was not happy in her mind: she deeply felt the generosity of Sir Frederick's conduct; and more than once since the occurrence of the incident had she said within herself, "Oh, that I could tell him everything!"

Sir Frederick, as we have said, had retired to his own private room; and there for a while did he busy himself with the letters that had reached him that morning. Some he answered: on the backs of others he made memoranda for reference to the account-books at the office in the City; and others he placed aside that they might be submitted to his partners when in consultation with them. Presently the door opened, and a footman entered to state that the architect who had built Tudor House, requested an interview with Sir Frederick.

The merchant desired that the architect should be admitted; and in a few minutes this individual was conducted into the study. Presenting a paper to Sir Frederick, he intimated that he had called to receive the balance of his account.

"Which might have been settled long ago, Mr. Styles," said the merchant, drawing himself up with a certain cold business-like pomposity, "if you had chosen to send it in."

"I am perfectly aware of that, Sir Frederick," responded the architect: "but I did not want the money—I knew it was safe—and moreover I really had not time to go into the different details."

The merchant opened the document which had been presented to him; and spreading it on his desk, he proceeded to examine the items of the account. Taking down a file, he referred to former accounts: then he consulted the cash-book, which he took from a drawer; and having thus satisfied himself that all the items were correct, he proceeded to verify the addition of the pounds, shilling, and pence columns. All this he did in a precise and methodical manner, with coolness and deliberation, and yet with a certain perceptible business pride, so to speak, which in itself was as much as to say, "Look how carefully I conduct all my business—and profit by the example!"

Having added up the columns, Sir Frederick slowly bent his cold eyes upon the architect—and said gravely, if not sternly, "Mr. Styles, might I ask whether you have frequently the misfortune of making mistakes in adding up your accounts?"

"Errors will occur, Sir Frederick," was the answer: "but I flatter myself that I make them as seldom as most people."

"Errors never occur in my office, sir!" observed the merchant, drawing himself up. "A clerk of mine who should have the misfortune to make such an addition as this, would never have the chance of making another within the walls of my establishment. Look, Mr. Styles! You have set down a total of eleven hundred and thirteen pounds, eleven shillings, and eleven pence-halfpenny; whereas I make it eleven hundred and thirteen pounds twelve shillings, and three pence halfpenny."

The architect felt infinitely relieved when he found that the discrepancy was of so trifling a character: and as his time was precious, he wished to settle the business at once. But Sir Frederick appeared to take a sort of cold-blooded inward delight in delaying him as a punishment for having made a mistake in his account to the extent of a few pence. He therefore sententiously expatiated on the necessity of being accurate in even the minutest matters: and then he slowly and deliberately cast up the columns, with the architect looking over his shoulder.

"And now, Mr. Styles," he said, "if you will receipt this account, it shall be paid."

Rising from his chair, the great merchant advanced towards the safe, which he opened; and he took forth the cash-box. Meanwhile the architect had receipted the account; and Sir Frederick looked at the mode in which the receipt was written, to assure himself that it was consistent with the proper formality. He then opened the cash-box; he looked in one compartment, where the notes ought to be—it was empty! Sir Frederick was astounded: but not for an instant did he suffer his features to betray the feeling which had thus seized upon him. He opened the other compartment, where the gold ought to be: not a single coin was there! Still Sir Frederick was outwardly as calm, as unruffled, and as imperturbable as ever: and he coldly said, as he closed the cash-box, "After all, I had better give you a cheque for the amount."

"Just as you please, Sir Frederick," replied the Architect, making way for the merchant to sit down at his desk again.

Sir Frederick wrote out the cheque: Mr. Styles received it—bowed—and took his departure. When he was gone, Sir Frederick again rose from his seat, and looked into the safe—but beheld none of the notes nor golden coins there. He consigned the cash-box back to its place—locked up the safe—and put the key in his pocket.

"There must have been upwards of two thousand two hundred pounds in that cash-box the night before last," he said to himself; "and Anastasia took it all!"

The merchant naturally concluded that his wife had been dreadfully extravagant in various ways; but he was bewildered as to what particular debt could have amounted to so large a sum. He knew that Anastatia did not gamble at the card-table, for the best of all possible reasons that she never played cards at all. It could not have been to

assist her brother that she had been so suddenly pressed for money: because if so, the intervention of the man Shadbolt would have been unnecessary. That it was *one* debt, and not several, which she had paid the night before last, was to be argued from the fact of only one creditor, or one creditor's representative, having called to assert a pecuniary claim. Who, then, could be this *one* creditor to whom she had contracted so immense a liability?—for as a matter of course Sir Frederick felt convinced that Anastatia, and Anastatia only, had emptied the cash-box of its contents.

For a moment the merchant thought of proceeding straight to his wife to question her on the subject: but this idea he the next instant banished from his mind. He had told her to say nothing more on the subject—he himself had avoided it: he felt that there would be something mean, little, and paltry in re-opening that topic, inasmuch as the very prefatory words which in such a case he would have to utter must be to the effect that she had taken a much larger sum than he had anticipated or intended. Nevertheless, Sir Frederick was resolved to institute some investigation. His mind was troubled: suspicions, vague and indefinite, were rising up in his brain. He remembered his wife's confusion when a week back he had sought her in the drawing-room immediately after her first interview with Shadbolt: he naturally considered that there was something strange in the manner in which this same Shadbolt had come to persecute her on the night that she was receiving company—strange also that she should have been so much troubled when his visit was announced—and that with a sort of terror she should have granted him an interview instead of with becoming dignity bidding him call on a future day and a more suitable occasion. And now, too, Sir Frederick bethought himself of the way in which Anastatia had swept her letters and papers into her desk on that afternoon when he (Sir Frederick) had sought her in the drawing-room, as already alluded to. All these reflections troubled the great City merchant; and in spite of himself he felt those suspicions which were agitating his mind, gathering strength and power, although of so vague and indefinite a character.

From what the reader has seen of the merchant's disposition, he may have comprehended that beneath a certain exterior show of cold pride and subdued ostentation, there was no small amount of real meanness and pettiness. These little feelings were now rising uppermost; and under their influence Sir Frederick found himself leaving the study and making his way up to that apartment where Anastatia's writing-desk usually stood upon a small table in a recess. On entering this apartment, Sir Frederick looked at the writing-desk with an expression of countenance as if he were saying to himself, "That desk doubtless contains the means of elucidating this mystery!"

As he immediately afterwards slowly glanced around, he beheld a small bunch of keys lying upon another table. The temptation was irresistible: indeed the presence of those keys was precisely what the merchant was desiring at the instant. He took them up: the very first which he applied to the writing-desk was the one that fitted; and now that merchant who was usually all business-like deliberation in his proceedings, was hasty, quick, and even nervous in what he was doing. He was afraid that his wife or a servant might enter and surprise him in the midst of an action which he felt to be mean and pitiful, although perhaps not altogether without justification under the circumstances. He turned over the papers; he took up a pink-tinted billet; and on reading the name of Madame Angelique, a dark expression came over his countenance. He perused its contents. It demanded five hundred and sixty-three pounds, "as per bill delivered;" and it intimated that Mr. Isaac Shadbolt was empowered to receive the amount. This individual's two visits to Tudor House were therefore no longer a mystery: but there were other circumstances which were very far from being satisfactory to Sir Frederick Latham.

"A year has elapsed," he muttered to himself, "since I expressly desired Anastatia to leave off dealing with that woman whose infamous character I accidentally discovered, and which I mentioned to my wife as my reason for the request that I made at the time. She must have disobeyed me—she must have since been secretly dealing there!"

Graver and darker, as well as more definite became the merchant's suspicions; and he hastened to look over the rest of the papers which he found in the desk. These were all Madame Angelique's bills, duly receipted at dates shortly after they were sent in; and there was no bill of a date later than the period when, a year back, Sir Frederick had so expressly desired his wife to discontinue her patronage of Madame Angelique's millinery establishment. But amongst those papers was the receipt given by Mr. Shadbolt for the sum specified in the pink-tinted billet. Sir Frederick's suspicion flowed into the correct channel: he regarded that billet as the vehicle of an extortion. Indeed his wife's conduct itself naturally appeared to be replete with causes for misgiving and distrust.

"Wherefore," asked Sir Frederick of himself, "should she have taken upwards of two thousand pounds to pay a bill of between five and six hundred?"

There were no other documents in the desk which at all interested the merchant: he arranged the papers in the order in which he had found them—he closed the desk—he deposited the keys on the other table—and he issued from the apartment. His mind was already made up how to act: he ordered his horse—and dispensing with the attendance of a groom, rode forth alone. Brixton Hill was soon reached; and giving his horse to a loitering boy to hold, Sir Frederick Latham knocked at the door of Madame Angelique's villa. The retired milliner was at home; and the merchant was conducted into her presence. Personally he was a stranger to her; and as he gave no name to the pretty servant-girl who answered the door, Madame Angelique was unaware who the visitor was, as well as what his business might be. She saw that he was cold and reserved in his manner: but she, on the other hand, was all affability and courtesy as she desired him to be seated.

"Perhaps you will know my name, Madame Angelique," began the merchant, "when I announce it as Sir Frederick Latham."

The ex-milliner was startled; and her guilty conscience instantaneously smote her with the idea that her recent successful extortion, the proceeds of which she had duly shared with Mr. Shadbolt, was known to the victim's husband.

"Whether you have anything to fear as the result of my visit," continued Sir Frederick, "depends entirely on yourself. If you answer all my questions in a manner proving that you are responding faithfully and truthfully, you have nothing to apprehend: but, if on the other hand, you prevaricate or attempt to deceive me, I shall at once take measures which you will repent."

"Good heavens, sir, what do you mean?" faltered the terrified Frenchwoman, now bitterly repenting her folly in having jeopardized herself anew after having so well escaped from former perils.

"Lady Anastatia Latham," continued the merchant, fixing his cold eyes upon the ex-milliner, "very recently paid some five or six hundred pounds to an agent of your's by the name of Shadbolt. You see that I know everything; and it is therefore hardly necessary that I should allude to your billet in which you made that demand."

"Oh! I will give back the money at once, Sir Frederick!" exclaimed the terrified Frenchwoman, quailing beneath the merchant's cold searching gaze.

"No—that is not the object of my visit," he responded. "I care nothing for the money. All the world knows that to Sir Frederick Latham such a sum is as a drop of water to the ocean. You confess that you had no real claim to that money?"

"It is but too clear, Sir Frederick," replied Madame Angelique, "that you know this much already. But what do you want of me?"—and she quivered from head to foot.

"I want you to tell me," rejoined the merchant, with a coldly resolute air, "by what means you gained such power—such ascendancy over my wife—the means by which you were enabled to exercise this terrorism—this coercion? Speak candidly, Madame Angelique; and I will not merely forgive you for the extortion—an extortion which would transport you—but I will go so far as to declare that no evil nor incouvenience shall result to yourself from whatsoever information you may give me. Come, shall I assist you? Well, then, let me at once proclaim my knowledge that your late establishment was not altogether for milliuery purposes."

"Oh! but, Sir Frederick," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "what—what will become of poor Lady Anastatia?"

"You have almost said sufficient in those few words," answered the merchant, quivering inwardly, though outwardly he still betrayed no emotion, "to prevent me from wishing to continue this discourse. Nevertheless you must speak out: if you have any regard for yourself, you will have none for Lady Anastatia. Come, be quick!—explain whatsoever you may have to tell me without more useless parlance."

"I will, Sir Frederick—I will," replied Madame Angelique. "Lady Anastatia—Ah! it is shocking that you should drive me to this confession!—certainly did make use of my establishment in a particular way——"

"She received a paramour there?" said the merchant, still speaking in a voice which trembled not.

"Well, yes, Sir Frederick. Women will be women——"

"Proceed, madam," he said sternly. "My wife met a paramour at your house? How long was this ago?"

"Well, Sir Frederick, the first time it might have been between two and three years—perhaps quite three years—as far as I can recollect——"

"Profligate even before marriage!" muttered the merchant to himself. "Go on, Madame Angelique," he added audibly. "How often do you suppose——"

"Oh, not very often, sir!—a very few times!" exclaimed Madame Angelique.

"And has this ever taken place within the last two years?" inquired the merchant, thus including the period which had elapsed since his marriage with Lady Anastatia.

"Well, Sir Frederick," rejoined the Frenchwoman, "to tell the truth, there may have been some three or four interviews within the term you name—but that was more than a year ago—indeed for the last twelvemonth I have seen nothing of Lady Anastatia—and she suddenly ceased to deal with me."

"Now tell me, Madame Angelique," continued the merchant, "who was the paramour that my guilty wife thus met? Or perhaps there was more than one?" he added, with a slight perceptible bitterness of tone.

"No—only one: of *that* I am certain," answered the Frenchwoman. "But I really do not know his name——indeed I don't think I ever saw him——"

"No? I presume because he was admitted into your house from that of your accommodating neighbour, M. Bertin, next door?"—and there was now a more perceptible tincture of bitterness in Sir Frederick Latham's accents.

"Is it possible that you were ever in my house?" asked Madame Angelique.

"I? Never, madam!" and the merchant drew himself up with a cold disdainful hauteur.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Frederick," said Madame Angelique: "but as you seem to know everything, I thought perhaps—pray excuse me ——I intended no offence——some of the first people have been in my late establishment——"

"So it appears," said the merchant, half drily, half bitterly; "female as well as male. But can you not afford me any clue to the discovery of this paramour of my wife's? Do you not know, madam, that it is now a husband who is seeking to learn the author of his dishonour—the name of the villain who has wrecked his happiness——No, not wrecked his happiness! I will not admit that the profligacies of a vile woman and of some unprincipled libertine can wield so tremendous an influence over Sir Frederick Latham."

"Really I am unable to give you any information on that head——I would if it were in my power——I have no reason," continued Madame Angelique, "to conceal anything from you. I very seldom saw the gentlemen who came to my establishment: it was sufficient for me that any lady might say she had made an appointment there—and all was managed secretly through the aid of trustworthy domestics——"

"Do you think it would be of any use," inquired Sir Frederick Latham, "if I were to go and question M. Bertin?"

"Not the slightest," responded Madame Angelique. "M. Bertin never knew with what particular lady any particular gentleman might have had an appointment. It was sufficient for the gentleman to afford M. Bertin some proof that he had no sinister nor hostile motive in seeking to pass through his house into mine——"

"I understand," interjected Sir Frederick. "There is consequently no means for me to discover the name of my guilty wife's paramour?"

"None that I can point out," replied Madame Angelique. "But pray let me beseech you, Sir Frederick Latham—do let me beg and entreat that you will deal mercifully with her ladyship! Ah! sir, consider——"

"Silence, madam!" interrupted the merchant sternly: "it is not for you to offer these intercessions—it is for me to act as I think fit. We made a bargain at the outset—and I will keep it. You have given me all the information in your power; and you shall not suffer therefrom. For the present I enjoin you to maintain the strictest secrecy as to everything that has now passed between us. It is possible that I may have to see you again——"

"At any hour, Sir Frederick," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "may you obtain access to me. And relative to that little sum——"

"Keep it—keep it," responded the merchant, disdainfully: and taking up his hat, he issued forth from the apartment.

No one, on perceiving Sir Frederick Latham issue forth from that villa—deliberately mount his horse—and as methodically take a shilling from his purse to give to the poor boy who had held the animal, would have conjectured how much his feelings had been inwardly agitated, or how tensely they were still wrung. He had affected in Madame Angelique's presence that the supposed guilt of his wife, and the presumed villany of some paramour, could not wield so great an influence over him as to wreck his happiness altogether; but he had not in that declaration expressed the truth. His was the sort of pride which was exactly the one to be most wounded by the exposure of his dishonour. He was too shrewd and coldly calculating not to be aware that if an explosion took place, all his friends and acquaintances would in their mingled scandal and wisdom observe "that it was just what he might have expected for marrying out of his own sphere." And then too, if he brought the affair before the tribunals and sued for a divorce, he would have to parade all Madame Angelique's evidence—he would have to show that Anastatia had been incontinent before her marriage—and those same scandalous wiseacre friends of his would, with knowing shakes of the head, whisper amongst themselves "that a daughter of the aristocracy would never have thrown herself away upon him unless she had very good reasons for so doing."

But how was Sir Frederick to act? To consign to oblivion everything he had heard, was impossible: to live with Anastatia as before, was not to be thought of: to abstain from making her acquainted with the fact that everything was discovered, was more than even the cold calculating worldly disposition of Sir Frederick Latham could bend itself to. For the first time in his life the great merchant found himself bewildered how to act; and, as he rode homeward a thousand painful thoughts conflicted in his brain.

On reaching Tudor House, he learnt that Anastatia had gone out in the carriage, and that her ladyship had left a message to the effect that she intended to proceed to town to call on her parents, the Earl and Countess of Fordwich. Sir Frederick was glad that his wife was thus temporarily absent; it afforded him an opportunity of deliberating a while on the course which he ought to pursue. But feeling as if the confined air of his study oppressed him, he walked forth into his grounds. While there, he beheld a carriage drive up to the gate; and as the equipage entered, he saw that it was Queen Indora's. The Queen herself was not however in it: the occupants were Mr. Redcliffe, Christian, and Christina. The twins had come to pay the usual visit of courtesy after having been invited to the entertainment at Tudor House: while Mr. Redcliffe also deemed it suitable to pay his respects in the same quarter, inasmuch as he himself had likewise been invited, though he declined the invitation; and moreover Sir Frederick was the British financial agent for that royal lady whom Mr. Redcliffe was engaged, when circumstances should permit, to conduct to the altar.

CHAPTER CXXVI.

THE BANK-NOTES.

THE great City merchant was for almost the first time in his life in one of those moods which are utterly uncongenial for the reception of visitors: but the occupants of the carriage had already seen him in the grounds—and it was therefore impossible to deny himself. The carriage stopped—the twins and Mr. Redcliffe alighted—and Sir Frederick Latham advanced to welcome them.

The merchant maintained his wonted demeanour: no one could have suspected that anything unusual had occurred. After some little discourse he requested Christian and Christina to ramble about the grounds and gardens at their pleasure, while he remained conversing with Mr. Redcliffe. The twins were glad of this opportunity to leave the two gentlemen together: for they knew that Mr. Redcliffe purposed to make a particular communication to Sir Frederick Latham.

Accordingly, after a little more conversation on general topics, Mr. Redcliffe said, "Sir Frederick, I think it my duty to inform you of something which happened the night before last—and thereby to put you on your guard against a character who is evidently of a very desperate description, and who appears to be lurking about the least frequented suburbs of the metropolis."

"Do you mean a robber—a highwayman—a lurking thief?" asked the merchant.

"I do," responded Mr. Redcliffe. "The night before last, my young friends Mr. and Miss Ashton, when returning from your house in the carriage, were intercepted by a villain dressed as a Lascar, but who is beyond all doubt an English

ruffian thus disguised. A struggle took place between him and Christian: Lord Rushbrook drove up at the time, and lent his aid: but the false Lascar managed to escape, and in a manner too which created much surprise in the mind of my young friend Ashton. It further appeared that on some previous night, this very same disguised Lascar stopped Lord Rushbrook, and either did actually rob him or attempted to rob him—but which it really was, I cannot say; for his lordship—perhaps from false pride—sought to hush up the matter. It is however Christian Ashton's opinion that the Viscount's groom could tell more of the particulars of that case. The Viscount begged Ashton not to mention at Tudor House a single syllable of any of these circumstances; and he advanced reasons which led Christian to promise compliance with this entreaty. But last evening Miss Ashton was herself waylaid by the same villain: fortunately however there was prompt succour at hand to rescue her; and the false Lascar escaped. It has now become so evident that the fellow is a most desperate and dangerous character, that I represented to Ashton this morning that it was a positive duty to disregard Lord Rushbrook's desire for secresy and silence, and to put you upon your guard, inasmuch as twice in your nighbourhood have this robber's avocations been exercised. Whether you will mention all these things to Lady Anastatia, is a matter for your own consideration."

"To be sure," said Sir Frederick, whose heart sickened at the mere mention of Lady Anastatia's name. "I am exceedingly obliged to you, Mr. Redcliffe, for all this information. Rushbrook has said not a word of either of these adventures, although I saw him yesterday——But how came it that he and Mr. Ashton should the night before last have suffered the villain to escape them?"

"I have already hinted," replied Mr. Redcliffe, "that the occurrence is somewhat a singular one. It appears that the false Lascar was completely in the power of Lord Rushbrook and our young friend Christian: they had hold upon his garments. All of a sudden the Lascar looked very hard at the Viscount, and said these words—'What about that safe and cash-box?'—whereupon the Viscount suddenly let go his hold upon the villain: he broke away from Christian, and thus escaped."

Sir Frederick Latham heard with a sudden astonishment the latter portion of this explanation: the words "safe" and "cash-box" all in an instant appeared by some incomprehensible means to connect what the merchant was now listening to, with all that for the last few hours had been so painfully uppermost in his mind.

"What were the words he made use of?" inquired Sir Frederick of Mr. Redcliffe.

"I recollect perfectly well," was the latter's response, "that Christian Ashton mentioned them to me as being precisely these—'What about that safe and cash-box?'—And then, it might have been imagination on Christian's part, but he assures me it struck him that Viscount Rushbrook seemed to stagger back a pace or two, while he certainly let go of the man's garments as if his hands had suddenly been smitten with paralysis. This description, moreover, seems to have been corroborated by what Rushbrook himself said immediately afterwards, and which was to the effect that he had been seized with a dizziness—a sudden sickness or something of the kind—and which he attributed to the viands he had eaten at supper having disagreed with him."

All this appeared more and more strange to Sir Frederick Latham: for with his knowledge of Rushbrook's character, he was naturally led to surmise that he had some very substantial reasons indeed for keeping silence, and enjoining it to be kept, in respect to the two perilous adventures with the Lascar. And moreover, Sir Frederick could not help thinking that what had been taken for a sudden paralysis of the hands, was in reality a terror inspired by the words thrown out from the lips of the false Lascar: while the plea of sickness from indigestion was merely an excuse to account for the same. But still the merchant was at a loss for any probable or feasible means of intelligibly connecting the adventure in respect to the Lascar with his own safe and cash-box whence all the money had disappeared.

"I can assure you, Sir Frederick," added Mr. Redcliffe, "our young friend Christian was very much annoyed that the false Lascar should have escaped him—and all the more so when he heard that by this escape the ruffian had remained at large to attempt an outrage against the youth's sister Christina."

"I will assuredly give orders to have my premises watched," observed Sir Frederick: "for so desperate a character as this false Lascar, may attempt murder before his exploits are cut short by the hand of justice."

The two gentlemen were now rejoined by Christian and Christina, who had been rambling through the grounds; and the party, taking their leave of Sir Frederick, drove away in the carriage.

Sir Frederick continued to walk in his grounds, pondering everything that had happened in the earlier part of the day, as well as everything that he had just heard. In reference to the safe and the cash-box he knew not what to think: the Lascar's allusion to those objects was so strange, it could not have been a mere coincidence. While he was thus in perplexity giving way to his reflections, Lord Rushbrook's phaeton came dashing up the avenue,—the Viscount driving, the groom seated by his side.

"There is something singular in these frequent visits of my brother-in-law," said the merchant to himself. "He was here yesterday—he is here again to-day. He cannot expect to get any more money out of me so soon; and I am sure that it is not through love of either his sister or myself that he favours us with such frequent visits."

And the merchant was right, though he suspected not how: for Rushbrook had indeed come to ascertain whether anything had been said in respect to the adventures with the Lascar. Sir Frederick went forward to receive his brother-in-law; and they entered the house together. After some little conversation, the merchant made a pretext for temporarily leaving the room; and he hastened in search of Rushbrook's groom. He had said nothing to the Viscount relative to all he had so recently heard: he wished in the first instance to learn whatsoever additional information the groom himself might be possibly able to afford. The man was found at the stables, looking at Sir

Frederick's horses; and the merchant beckoned him aside.

"What was that adventure with a disguised Lascar the other night?" asked Sir Frederick. "Come—I dare say your master did not wish to frighten us at Tudor House, and therefore he has told you to hold your tongue: but you need not hesitate to explain everything to me:"—and thus speaking, Sir Frederick placed a guinea in the groom's hand.

"Why, sir, the truth is," responded the domestic, "there were two adventures with that Lascar—one about a week back, and the other on the night of the party. To which do you allude, sir?"

"To both," was the response.

"On the first occasion, sir," resumed the domestic, "I think his lordship had taken a little too much of your wine, sir—saving your presence—and he upset the phaeton. I was stunned on the spot; and when I came to my senses again his lordship was crying out 'Stop thief!'—and then his lordship went on swearing terribly, making me believe that he had been robbed. There was something strange in his lordship's manner, sir—though he declared he had *not* been robbed——"

"And what about the adventure of the night before last?" inquired Sir Frederick.

"Why, sir, as we were driving home, we saw a fellow in white struggling with young Mr. Ashton; and then his lordship cried out that he was the very same Lascar who had robbed him the other night."

The groom proceeded to relate the incident of the Lascar's escape from Lord Rushbrook and Christian, just as Mr. Redcliffe had already detailed the circumstances to Sir Frederick: but the groom of his own accord added "that his lordship seemed struck quite aback when the ruffian spoke about the safe and cash-box."

"And you have not the slightest notion what the villain alluded to?" said the merchant inquiringly.

"Not the least, sir," replied the groom.

"Now tell me, my good fellow," continued Sir Frederick—and he put another guinea into the domestic's hand,—"has his lordship your master paid any considerable sum of money yesterday or to-day——I mean, is it within your knowledge that he has done so? Whatever information you give me, will do you no harm; and you can keep silent as to having been questioned in this way."

"I don't know, sir, whether his lordship has paid away any large sum of money," answered the groom: "but saving your presence, sir, and with no disrespect, I *do* know that there was an execution out against his lordship for twelve or thirteen hundred pounds—because he told me to take care that he was always denied if ever Buffer the Sheriff's officer should happen to call. Well, sir, yesterday his lordship drove to Mr.. May's, the attorney's, in Gray's Inn Square; and when he came out of the office, he jumped into the phaeton, saying he didn't now care a curse for all the Buffers in existence."

"Breathe not a syllable to a soul that I have been questioning you," said Sir Frederick.

As he separated from the groom—who knew not what to think of the numerous queries that had been put to him—the merchant looked at his watch, and found that it was now three o'clock. He at once ordered his carriage to be got ready; and ascending to the drawing-room, he said to Rushbrook, "Your lordship must pardon me for leaving you so abruptly: but I have just received a letter which calls me into the City."

"Well, I shall be off likewise," said the Viscount. "Shall I give you a *lift* in my phaeton?"

"I thank you, my lord," responded the merchant: "but I set a value upon my neck, and your lordship's reckless driving by no means suits my ideas of safety."

During his ride into London, Sir Frederick Latham continued to reflect more and more on everything he had heard; and he wondered whether the inquiries he was about to institute would throw any light upon one portion of the topics which bewildered him. He was a man of remarkable sagacity in business-matters, and keenly prompt to seize upon any clue which by any possibility might seem to promise the unravelment of a mystery. He repaired straight to the office of Mr. May, the solicitor, in Gray's Inn Square: that gentleman was alone at the time in his private room; and he at once received Sir Frederick Latham. The lawyer and the merchant were personally unknown to each other: but the instant the great name of the latter was announced, the professional gentleman was on the alert to receive him with all possible courtesy and respect.

"Mr. May," said Sir Frederick, taking the seat which was proffered to him; "I am about to put three or four questions which may seem singular: but I beg you not to refuse to answer them on that account—nor to prejudge disparagingly the nobleman whose name I shall have to mention. I allude to my brother-in-law, the Viscount Rushbrook."

"Ah, indeed!" said Mr. May, with the air of one to whom that name was far from unfamiliar.

"You know the Viscount," continued Sir Frederick,—"I mean professionally——"

"I have not the honour of being his lordship's professional adviser," interjected Mr. May.

"No—but you have been very recently engaged against him," resumed the merchant; "and yesterday he called upon you——"

"True, Sir Frederick," responded the solicitor: "his lordship came to settle a little matter——but to be candid with you, Viscount Rushbrook paid me some thirteen hundred pounds to settle a liability on which I had been compelled to issue an execution against his person."

"Precisely so," said the merchant. "And now I am about to ask the question which may seem most singular. Did you happen to take the numbers of the notes in which Lord Rushbrook settled this liability?"

"Most assuredly," exclaimed Mr. May: "for I at once sent off the money to my banker's; and as a matter of precaution, I invariably keep the numbers of bank-notes thus confided to the care of a clerk."

"Would you favour me with a sight of those numbers?" asked Sir Frederick.

The lawyer, wondering at the request, at once produced the list,—which the merchant compared with a slip that he took from his own pocket-book. All the numbers on Mr. May's list corresponded with a quantity of those which were on the

merchant's list: but Sir Frederick displayed not any particular feeling which could enable the lawyer to judge of the effect produced on him by the result of the investigation.

"I return you my best thanks," said the merchant, rising from his seat; "and I beg that the subject of our interview may be kept altogether secret."

"I hope, Sir Frederick," said Mr. May, "that there is nothing unpleasant——"

"Not the least!" interrupted the merchant. It was as much for Lord Rushbrook's sake as my own, that it was desirable to ascertain the numbers of these notes which were paid into your hand."

Sir Frederick Latham then took his leave of the lawyer; and entering his carriage, he ordered the coachman to return to Balham Hill. The point was now ascertained: the greater portion of the contents of the cash-box had evidently found their way into the hands of Lord Rushbrook.

"And thus Anastatia," said the merchant to himself, "has robbed her husband for the sake of her brother! This is but too evident. But yet I am as far off as ever from comprehending what meant the allusion of that false Lascar to the safe and the cash-box This is a strange mystery: but I must unravel it!"

During the remainder of the drive homeward, the merchant continued to reflect how he should act in respect to his wife—but without coming to any positive decision. On reaching Tudor Lodge, he found a note from Anastatia, to the effect that her mother, the Countess of Fordwich, had been taken very ill, and that she (Anastatia) therefore purposed to remain with her parent until the evening. Sir Frederick was not sorry: the delay would afford him additional leisure to settle his mind as to the plan to be pursued in respect to that wife whom he believed to have been so guilty. He dined by himself; and afterwards walked forth into his grounds—it being a beautiful moonlit evening in that autumn season of the year of which we are writing.

While thus rambling in the garden, Sir Frederick Latham revolved in his own mind every particular which he had received from the lips of Madame Angelique in the forenoon; and he thought to himself that he had not been precise enough in his questions for the purpose of ascertaining who was the paramour that had been spoken of. He fancied that there were other queries he might have put—minuter particulars which he might have gleaned; and he determined to visit Madame Angelique again forthwith. He was a cautious man, as the reader has seen: he wished to do nothing rashly: it was consistent with his character to obtain as many details as possible in respect to circumstances of such grave importance. He ordered his horse to be saddled; and this time he took a groom to attend upon him; for the road from Balham Hill to Brixton is in some parts lonely—and Sir Frederick had the Lascar prominent amongst other images in his mind

The evening, as we have said, was beautifully moonlit; and a distance of about three miles and a half was soon accomplished. The merchant did not however wish his domestic to perceive where he intended to call, for fear lest the villa should be known as the residence of a retired tradeswoman from the West End. Sir Frederick therefore bade his dependant await his return at a respectable inn at a little distance; and he proceeded on foot to Madame Angelique's abode. On reaching his destination, Sir Frederick beheld no lights in any of the front rooms; and he thought that probably Madame Angelique might be out: for as it was only half-past nine o'clock he could not suppose that she had thus early retired to rest. He knocked at the front door; and at that instant violent screams pealing through the house, reached the ear of Sir Frederick Latham.

We must here interrupt the thread of our narrative for a brief space, in order to explain the reason of these cries. There was a fair being held at a little distance, in the neighbourhood; and Madame Angelique had given permission to her two men-servants (the coachman and footman) as well as to her cook to visit the scene. She therefore remained alone in the house with the pretty maid, who has already been noticed. The servants who had received permission to visit the fair, had gone thither at about seven o'clock, after their mistress's dinner; and a short while afterwards the pretty maid might have been seen tripping across the garden—thence a little way along the road—to drop a couple of letters into the local post-office. The distance was not altogether a hundred yards: the pretty maid's absence did not therefore last above a few minutes: but still it was sufficient to afford the opportunity for a lurking villain who was on the watch, to glide into the house.

This was none other than Barney the Burker, in his Lascar disguise. He had seen Madame Angelique's men-servants at the fair: he had recognised them by their livery, which he had observed on the day when the carriage had passed him during his altercation with the Duke of Marchmont; and believing Madame Angelique to be well off, he thought he might as well profit by the comparatively unprotected state of her residence, now that he beheld the men-servants at the fair. He concluded that the woman whom he saw with them, was likewise a dependant of the ex-milliner's household; and taking care not to be seen by these domestics, he left them in the vicinage of the booths and stalls. Making the best of his way in the direction of the villa he came within sight of it at the very moment the maid-servant was tripping forth with her mistress's letters; and stealing through the garden at the back, Barney the Burker glided into the house. The kitchen was unoccupied at the moment: he traversed it—he entered the passage leading to the hall—the parlour-door happened to be standing ajar—he peeped in, and beheld Madame Angelique taking a comfortable nap upon the sofa, which was drawn near the table whereon wine and dessert appeared. There was no lamp in the room: but the light from the window was sufficient to reveal the Frenchwoman's sleeping form to the Burker's eyes He crept softly up the stairs; and entered a bed-chamber, which by its appearance was evidently that of Madame Angelique. There he remained for a minute or two, deliberating whether he should ransack the place at once and trust to circumstances to enable him to beat a retreat—or whether he should hide himself under the bed, and

by making his appearance before Madame Angelique in the middle of the night, extort from her terrors a far larger booty than he might perhaps succeed in obtaining from his own unassisted researches in the room. The sound of the back-door closing, and then the light trip of footsteps ascending the stairs, left the Burker no farther discretion in the affair. He comprehended that the pretty servant-maid had returned, and that she was most probably seeking her mistress's chamber to prepare it for the night: so he accordingly slipped at once under the couch. The girl entered, and was for some time busied in the chamber,—the Burker being in readiness to spring forth and seize her by the throat if she should by any chance happen to look under the bed. Little suspected the pretty maid that danger was so imminent; and it was perhaps fortunate for her that she did not plunge her eyes into the ruffian's place of ambush.

For upwards of half an hour did the maid-servant remain in that chamber—more, as it would seem, for the purpose of whiling away the time than for the completion of any actual work which she had to do; because this latter might have been compressed into a third of that space. Jane was a lively, happy girl, and sang to herself during the interval she remained there—unconscious as the bird upon the bough that the concealed, coiled-up reptile was in readiness to spring forth. At length she quitted the room, taking the light with her; and the Burker thought to himself that as he had remained there secure so long, it would perhaps be better worth his while to tarry until Madame Angelique should come up to the chamber—when, after sleep had fallen upon her eyes, he might steal forth, he might awaken her, and he might compel her to surrender up all the money and valuables she had in the house. By this plan, too, he would secure himself a safe egress in the

midst of the night; whereas if he now plundered the chamber, and endeavoured to steal off, he might be perceived by either the maid or the mistress—an alarm might be raised—and his capture would be the result. All things considered therefore, the disguised Lascar preferred remaining where he was.

An hour passed—when the Burker heard Madame Angelique's steps in the hall below; and immediately afterwards her voice issued an instruction to the maid. This was to the effect that as Madame Angelique had made but a poor dinner, she fancied a lobster for her supper (for she was a very great gourmand); and Jane was desired to speed to the fishmonger's shop, which was at no great distance, and procure the coveted edible.

"Shall I first take up lights to the parlour, ma'am?" asked Jane, from the passage leading to the kitchen, which was on the ground floor, and not one of those odious subterraneans in which domestic servants are too often buried as if they were workers in miniature mines.

"No—wait till you come back," answered Madame Angelique: "but just give me a chamber-candle. You need not be afraid to go across to the fishmonger's: it is a beautiful clear evening, with the moon shining."

"Oh, I'm not afraid, ma'am," responded the pretty maid: and having given her mistress the lighted candle, she issued from the house.

Madame Angelique began mounting the stairs towards her chamber,—on reaching which she was about to change her evening toilet for a comfortable *deshabillée*, that she might all the more pleasantly abandon herself to the pleasure of the expected evening repast. But scarcely had she put the candle upon the drawers, when she was transfixed with horror on beholding a great coarse dusty boot protruding from beneath the drapery at the foot of the bed. For a moment she stood stupefied: then a cry escaped her lips—and she was making for the door, when her feet, kicking up the floor-carpet, became entangled therein—and down she fell.

Out rushed the Burker from his hiding-place; and as the terrified woman rose to her knees, she found herself confronted by the villanous-looking Lascar whom a few days previously she had relieved, and who had attacked the Duke of Marchmont.

"Shriek out again, and you're a dead 'ooman!" said the Burker, in a terrible voice, as he raised his club in a menacing manner.

Nevertheless Madame Angelique did cry out as she knelt at the villain's feet: he uttered a tremendous execration, and was about to strike with all his force at her head, when she suddenly left off screaming, and said, "For God's sake don't murder me! I'll give you everything I've got!"

"That's common sense," said the Burker; "and now look sharp about it, so that you may sit down all cozy and comfortable to eat that there lobster which the gal's gone for."

Meanwhile Sir Frederick Latham had knocked at the front door: but the sound was not heard up in the room where this scene was taking place—for it was situated at the back of the house, the whole front of the first storey being used as a drawing-room. Immediately after the merchant's knock, screams pealed forth: Sir Frederick at once knew there must be something wrong—and he rushed round to the back part of the premises. There he found the kitchen door standing wide open, as Jane had left it on going forth: and he entered the house. On reaching the passage, he heard a gruff voice say, "Thirty-two sovereigns? Why, it's all gammon. A lady like you——"

"I assure you I have no more ready money in the house," Madame Angelique replied in accents of shuddering terror.

The gruff voice gave vent to some bitter imprecation; and Sir Frederick Latham, now feeling convinced that a robbery was being perpetrated in the house, stole up the staircase. It was so well carpeted that the sounds of his steps were not heard; and all in a moment he burst into the chamber where the ruffian was keeping Madame Angelique in a state of such awful alarm.

"Ah!" ejaculated Sir Frederick, as he caught sight of the Lascar's dress.

A cry of joy pealed forth from the lips of the ex-milliner: but with a savage growl did the Burker spring towards the merchant. Sir Frederick, who was far from deficient in courage, at once closed with him—Madame Angelique seized upon the miscreant from behind—and he was hurled upon the floor.

"Hold him tight, Sir Frederick," exclaimed the Frenchwoman, "while I run for the police!"

"Stop, I command you!" cried the merchant, with his knee upon the Burker's chest and his right hand at the miscreant's throat. "Remain here, Madame Angelique!—do you hear me, I say?—remain here!"

"But this villain, Sir Frederick——"

"Silence—and do as I bid you! Now shut the door."

The Frenchwoman—who was at present as much astonished as she was just now alarmed—did as she was desired; and Sir Frederick said to the Burker, "Answer me a question or two, and I will let you go. Refuse—and I hand you over to the police."

"The fust is the best," responded Barney, gasping for breath, and smitten with surprise that he should be thus spoken to. "Now then, sir, what is it?"

"The night before last," continued the merchant, "you had a certain scene on the road near Balham Hill; and you said to a nobleman—Lord Rushbrook—who had you in custody, '*What about the safe and the cash-box?*'—whereupon he at once let you go. Tell me the meaning of those words."

"And if I do," said the Burker, "how do I know——"

"That I shall let you go?" interrupted the merchant. "Is it not worth your while to trust to my promise? You cannot make your position worse—but you may make it better."

"True enough!" ejaculated Barney. "So here goes——But the gal will be coming back with the lobster——"

"Go you, madam," said the merchant, "and see that your domestics——"

"There's only one at home—the other is out," observed Barney.

"Go, then, madam—and keep the one domestic quiet," said Sir Frederick Latham. "Let nothing of all this be known! And fear nothing!—for

this fellow is far more in my power than he fancies himself."

Madame Angelique quitted the chamber; and the merchant, without releasing the Burker from his prostrate position, hastened to say, "I have already told you on what conditions I am inclined to deal mercifully with you. Speak!—give me the explanation I have sought."

"I will, sir,—trusting to your goodness," responded the false Lascar. "You see, the fact is, sir—and there's no use in denying it—I thought as how the night you had that grand party would be a favourable one for me to do a little business in my way; and so I went to have a look about the premises: for it sometimes happens, you know, that genelman's servants theirselves has no objection to what we call a put-up affair——that means an arranged and planned robbery. Being rayther skilled in reading people's countenances, I could pretty easy tell which servants you may talk to in a particular way, and which you may not——"

"Well, well," interrupted Sir Frederick Latham, "you were lurking about my house the night of the party. What next?"

"I took the liberty of peeping in at a window," replied the Burker; "and what the deuce should I see, but a genelman helping hisself to a lot of notes and gold out of a kesh-box; and there was a safe a-standing open. Oh, ho! thinks I to myself——"

"Never mind what you thought," interrupted the City merchant. "Who was that gentleman?"

"Ah! sir, I knowed him pretty well," replied the Burker; "for the fact is, I'd met him before. He was your brother-in-law, as I've heerd tell—Lord Rushbrook."

"And he emptied the cash-box?" demanded Sir Frederick.

"That, by jingo, he did—and in no time too!" rejoined the Burker. "Then he put the kesh-box back into the safe; and just at that moment I do believe he twigged me a looking at him through the winder: for he gived such a start and turned as pale as death—but I bolted away like a shot. Of course I suspected in a moment he was doing summut he didn't ought to do; and so when I arterwards found myself in his power, I thought I'd just see what a little hint on the subject would produce; and bless you, sir, he let go his hold on me just for all the world as if he was dropping a hot tater."

"And now one word more," said the City merchant; "and you need not be afraid to answer me—for I have reason to know that you have just been telling me the truth, and I will keep my bargain with you. You had met Lord Rushbrook on a former occasion? Did you rob him *then?*—and if so, of how much? Now remember! if you tell me the truth, I am not going to take any step to make you disgorge your plunder: but I will suffer you to depart without any farther molestation."

"Well, sir, the fact is I *did* rob him," answered the Burker; "but it was a precious bad job for me—for like a cussed fool as I am, I lost all the money arterwards, and devilish near got myself took into the bargain."

"How much did you rob him of?" inquired Sir Frederick.

"Well, it was exactly two thousand pounds, all in bank-notes," answered the Burker. "As you may werry well suppose, I was astounded when I come to diskiver the amount; and as some of the notes was werry high ones—fifties and hundreds, I mean—I thought they was of no more use to me than the elephant was to the old genelman when he won it in a raffle. Howsomever, I recollected an old Jew that did a little business in that way—I mean who changed bank-notes without asking no questions; so off I posted to him. But what does the old scamp do but he gives me a lot of little notes, all five pounders—telling me he was only charging a hundred pounds for the job, and that I might think myself devilish lucky in having fallen into such hands. And so at first I did: but then, behold you, sir! when I afterwards tried to change one of the five pun' notes, the shopkeeper said as how it was a forgery and roared out for the police. If I hadn't given him a tap over the head and knocked him down senseless behind his own counter, it would have been all up with me. Howsomever, I got clear off: but every one of the notes the rascally old Jew had given me, was bad 'uns. I went to his quarters in the middle of the night with the intention of telling him a bit of my mind—and perhaps of giving *him* a tap too: but the waggabone had bolted; and so you see as how, sir, I was most cruelly robbed by that precious old scoundrel."

Sir Frederick had listened with much impatience to this long tale; but he thought he had better hear it to the end; and now that it was finished he had no more questions to ask. Keeping possession of the Burker's club, Sir Frederick rose from off his prostrate form; and stepping back in a manner which showed that he was prepared for any treacherous attack on the miscreant's part, he said, "You may now steal forth from the house. Proceed—I will follow! And beware how you are found again lurking in this neighbourhood, or in that of my own abode—for the police will have orders to take you into custody."

"Don't you be afeard, sir," answered the Burker; "I've had quite enow of these here parts of the country for the present."

The ruffian stole down the stairs,—Sir Frederick Latham following with the club in his hand, until he saw him safe out of the front door. Madame Angelique had in the meanwhile been talking to her pretty maid-servant in the kitchen,—the girl having returned from the neighbouring fishmonger's: but Jane was utterly unsuspicious of the incident which had occurred, and of the presence of the desperado in the house,—although it struck her that her mistress was somewhat flurried, and that it was likewise singular she should remain in conversation with her there. The ex-milliner heard the front door close; and she then quitted the kitchen. Rejoining Sir Frederick Latham in the hall, she conducted him into the parlour; and the merchant said, "You may perhaps think it strange, Madame Angelique, that I should have suffered that miscreant to escape: but as you heard a part of that conversation which I held with him, you may possibly have understood that I have a reason for dealing thus leniently. The truth is, he has given me some information which I was most anxious to obtain, and for which

it was well worth my while to bribe him by means of his own freedom. More I need not say upon the subject——unless it be to enjoin the strictest secresy on your part in respect to all that has thus occurred."

"I am sure, Sir Frederick," answered Madame Angelique, "after your kindness to me of this morning, you have only to express your wishes in order to have them fulfilled by me. But how came you at the house in the very nick of time——"

Sir Frederick explained that he had ridden across from Balham Hill, to ask some more questions in respect to the topic which had been discoursed upon in the morning: but Madame Angelique could give him no further explanations. She declared that she had never, to her knowledge, seen the paramour whom Lady Anastatia had occasionally met at her house; and in short, Sir Frederick Latham took his leave of the ex-milliner no wiser on that point than he was previous to this second visit.

But the mystery of the cash-box appeared to him to be now fully elucidated. Indeed, it was most natural for him to entertain the conviction that Anastatia had given Lord Rushbrook the key of the safe that he might help himself to its contents.

"And thus," said Sir Frederick to himself, as he rode homeward, "has my own wife enabled her own brother to rob me!—that wife who had already so grossly deceived me—that brother of her's whom I had already allowed to prey upon my purse! But there shall be an end of all this! Maledictions upon my folly in having married into one of the families of the aristocracy!"

CHAPTER CXXVII.

THE DENOUEMENT.

Sir Frederick Latham rose at an early hour in the morning, after having passed an almost sleepless night; and he immediately sent off one of his domestics on horseback to the residence of the Earl and Countess of Fordwich, to inquire after the health of the latter. It was not that Sir Frederick had the slightest consideration for the health of the Countess: his object in sending was to learn by indirect means when his wife Anastatia would be likely to return to Balham Hill—and whether the illness of her mother was of a severity calculated to detain her away from her home. Lady Anastatia sent back a note by the domestic, —wherein she cordially thanked her husband for his kindness in sending to inquire—she assured him that her mother, having passed a good night, was in a condition that inspired no further apprehension—and that she herself should be at Balham Hill by lunch time at two o'clock. On the receipt of this note, Sir Frederick sate down and penned a brief letter to his brother-in-law Lord Rushbrook, requesting him to call at Tudor House precisely at two o'clock, on business of considerable importance. Having sent off this letter, the City merchant walked forth into his grounds to deliberate again upon the plan which he had settled in his mind during the past night.

We should observe that Lord Rushbrook did not reside with his parents, but had apartments in some other fashionable quarter of the town. He did not know that his sister had passed the night beneath the paternal roof; and therefore instead of repairing thither to accompany her back to Balham Hill, he drove down in his own phaeton. It happened that the Viscount's equipage reached Tudor House only about five minutes before Lady Anastatia herself returned in her own carriage; and Sir Frederick Latham, who was watching from an arbour at the extremity of his grounds, was well pleased to observe that his brother-in-law and his wife accidentally reached Tudor House almost at the same instant. For he did not wish to be compelled to speak to one before the arrival of the other; and thus did circumstances favour his views in this respect.

The Viscount—who could not altogether conjecture what Sir Frederick wanted with him, but whose guilty conscience was nevertheless haunted by fears and misgivings—at once inquired for his brother-in-law and was informed that Sir Frederick had left word that he should be in punctually at two o'clock. While lingering upon the steps of the mansion to ask additional questions, the Viscount beheld Anastatia's equipage approach; and as he helped his sister to alight, he learnt from her lips that she had been since the previous day in attendance upon their mother.

"Sir Frederick has written, desiring me to be here at this hour," said the Viscount; "and he tells me in his letter that it is upon important business. I wonder what on earth the business can be?"

"If you cannot conjecture it, Robert," answered his sister, "you may be assured that I am still less able; for Sir Frederick seldom or never speaks to me upon matters of business. Let us go and seek him. Perhaps we shall find him in his study?"

"No," answered the Viscount; "he is out—but will be in at two o'clock. It wants ten minutes," he added, referring to his watch.

"I will hasten up-stairs to make some little change in my toilet," said Lady Anastatia: "and I will join you in the room where luncheon is served. I am happy to inform you, Robert, that our mother is now out of danger: but last evening she was in a state that filled me with the greatest apprehension. She might have died, Robert, before you would have come to inquire after her!"

"No one ever sent to tell me she was ill," replied the Viscount carelessly; "or if such a message were left at my lodgings, it was not delivered."

Anastatia heaved a profound sigh as she bent upon her brother a reproachful look, which was as much as to say that she feared all affectionate interest on behalf of his relatives was waning in his breast: but without another word she hastened up to her chamber, where she made some change in her toilet,—little suspecting the while that a storm was about to burst over her head. In about a quarter of an hour she repaired to the apartment where the luncheon was served up, and where she found her brother standing at the window.

"Here comes Sir Frederick!" he said; "he is just this moment entering the house. I waved my hand to him—but he did not appear to notice it. He is a singular fellow at times, this husband of your's, Anastatia!"

"He has been very munificent towards you,

Robert," said the lady, in a tone of rebuke and reproach.

"Oh, as for that —— But hush! here he comes!"

The door opened; and Sir Frederick made his appearance. Anastatia was about to hasten towards him, when she was suddenly struck by the extreme paleness of his countenance, and by his stern repelling demeanour. Lord Rushbrook failed not likewise to observe his brother-in-law's aspect; and the misgiving which had been floating in his mind, expanded into an absolute terror.

"Is anything the matter, Sir Frederick?" inquired Lady Anastatia, not daring to advance towards that husband who, instead of giving her encouragement so to do, appeared by his very look to repel her.

The merchant deliberately closed the door; and looking from his wife towards the Viscount—then back again at his wife—he surveyed them both with a gaze wherein scorn, contempt, indignation, and aversion were all commingled. Rushbrook was ready to sink with terror—for he now felt assured that the secret of the cash-box had by some means transpired: while Anastatia was smitten with the idea that something fresh had happened in respect to Shadbolt and Madame Angelique.

"Sit down, both of you," said the merchant, at length breaking silence, and speaking in a voice of cold command. "I have certain observations to make—and it is possible they may extend to some length."

"But my dear husband," said Lady Anastatia, advancing a step or two with trembling hesitation, "your manner is so singular——"

"Do you find it so, madam?" he asked, flinging upon her a bitter look. "It is not likely to improve as I proceed with the observations I have to make. But sit down, I say—and listen to me."

Anastatia sank upon a chair; and the tears began to trickle down her cheeks. Lord Rushbrook, overwhelmed with terror and confusion, drew forth his kerchief and fidgeted nervously with it: but his countenance the while was of corpse-like ghastliness.

"The reflection of your guilty consciences is visible in your looks," proceeded Sir Frederick Latham, slowly turning his eyes from one to the other.

Anastatia gave a sudden start—echoed the word "Guilty!"—and then sinking back in her seat, appeared as if about to faint: for all vital colouring quitted her cheeks. But still she did not completely lose her consciousness, though a seal had suddenly been placed upon her lips by the feelings which were overpowering her.

"You will admit," continued Sir Frederick in a tone of withering sarcasm, "that it is a splendid family into which I have married, and that I ought to be supremely proud of so brilliant an aristocratic connexion! No—instead of being proud of it, I have learnt to loathe and hate it, and to curse the day on which I was guilty of such besotted folly. But I will tell you where my pride *does* exist! It is in a regard for the opinion of the world; for I would not have that world know how egregiously, how miserably I have been duped! Therefore must the step I am about to take be in a measure glossed over. An excuse—a plea—a reason in such cases need never be wanting. Your temper and mine do not suit each other, Lady Anastatia," continued Sir Frederick, with a sort of sardonic mockery that was little consistent with his usual demeanour and accents; "and therefore we have agreed to separate."

"Separate?" cried Anastatia with another start; and it was now with a sort of wild bewilderment that she gazed upon her husband.

"Yes—separate!" rejoined Sir Frederick, who all in an instant had recovered his habitual coldness. "You know how you have deceived me—I might use far severer and harsher expressions—but it is not worth while—you cannot fail to comprehend my meaning——"

"My God!" moaned the wretched Anastatia, clasping her hands in anguish. "I admit that I have deceived you! I have been very culpable! ——But this chastisement is terrible! Oh, whatsoever plea be put forward, the world will look upon me as disgraced! Suspicion and scorn ever attach themselves to a woman who is separated from her husband. O, Sir Frederick——"

But here her voice was lost in piteous sighs and sobs; and so convulsed became her bosom that it seemed as if it must burst.

"As for you, my lord," continued the merchant, cold and implacable, as he averted his looks from his agonized wife and turned them upon her brother, "you will find a ready apology for never again seeking my presence. The brother of a woman who is separated from her husband, is supposed to take the woman's part; and you need not hesitate, Lord Rushbrook, to proclaim that you can never more think of speaking to me after my conduct to your sister. I shall not contradict your statement. Let me rather pass in the world as being harsh, arbitrary, and cruel, if you will: but let me not be regarded as that which I really am—a miserable, despicable, contemptible dupe!"

"My God!" murmured Anastatia: and she wrung her hands with anguish.

"So you see, my lord," continued Sir Frederick Latham, "you have an easy game to play; and so long as you play it in the manner I am now dictating, your own secrets will be safe with me. But if through malice or by accident you ever let slip a syllable which shall unveil me as a dupe—if you ever breathe a word which may raise a suspicion as to how I have been deceived by this accursed marriage of mine—that moment will I proclaim the whole truth to the world! Yes, I will proclaim it to the world—I will tell how you, Lord Rushbrook, played the part of a vile felon, a villanous robber in my house——"

A half-stifled shriek and another galvanic start denoted the exquisitely excruciating torture which Anastatia was experiencing; and then her half wild, half dismayed looks wandered from the countenance of her husband to that of her brother.

"Hush, hush—for God's sake, hush!" exclaimed the Viscount, starting up from his seat with a face that was livid through mingled terror, confusion, and shame, as he glanced in a frightened manner towards his sister, and entreatingly to his brother-in-law.

"Lord Rushbrook," said the implacable merchant, still outwardly cold, though inwardly experiencing a burning joy at being enabled to humble the haughty pride of a scion of that aristocratic family into which he had married,—"I tell you

that you may proclaim to the world whatsoever you will in respect to my harsh temper: but I repeat that you must beware how you expose me as a victim and a dupe, lest I on my side proclaim that on the night of the grand entertainment at Tudor House, you, Lord Rushbrook——"

"Sir Frederick, for mercy's sake, Sir Frederick!"—and the Viscount was reduced to the most abject condition of an entreating wretch.

"That on the night of the grand entertainment at Tudor House," proceeded the merciless Latham, "you stole into my study——"

"Sir Frederick!" moaned the Viscount.

"And you plundered me of many hundreds of pounds——"

"My God!"—and Rushbrook sank back annihilated upon his seat.

"What is this that I hear?" almost shrieked forth Anastatia, as she started up with wild looks. "Sir Frederick—Robert—speak—tell me——"

"It means, madam," responded her husband—though he himself was somewhat bewildered whether his wife were playing a part, or whether she could after all have been innocent of any complicity with her brother in respect to the robbery,—"it means, madam, that on the night when I entrusted the key of my safe to you, that you might take thence a certain sum of money—whatsoever might answer your purpose at the time——"

"And without hearing any more," exclaimed Anastatia,—"without understanding what your allusions meant—I declare here, in your presence, Sir Frederick—in the presence too of my brother—as solemnly as I would declare if standing in the presence of my God—that I took from your safe a sum less than six hundred pounds, and that I left twice or thrice as much in the cash-box—though I had not the curiosity to calculate how much."

"But the key, Anastatia—the key?" said the merchant, half suspiciously and half in the uncertainty of bewilderment: "how was it that the key found its way to the hand of another, and *that other* your brother Lord Rushbrook?"

"Sir Frederick, for heaven's sake, press not these queries," murmured the Viscount, advancing towards his brother-in-law, laying his hand upon his arm, and looking up into his face with an expression of the most anguished entreaty.

"Good heavens, Robert, what am I to think?" shrieked forth Anastatia: "what am I to understand by all this? It is some horrible mystery!—Ah! the key you spoke to me of—the key, Sir Frederick? Oh! I remember that on the night of the party I dropped it—I lost it for awhile—but I found it again—methought it was in the same spot where I might have dropped it. Oh, Sir Frederick! you remember that I offered it to you immediately after I ascended from your study to the ball-room? Would to heaven that you had taken it then! But tell me, Robert—what in heaven's name does it all mean?"

"Ah! you may well ask that question," exclaimed Sir Frederick Latham, now getting excited; "for everything must be cleared up! You lost that key, you say, Anastatia?"—then turning towards the Viscount, the merchant looked him steadfastly in the face, adding, "And you found it?"

"Mercy!" moaned the wretched nobleman, hanging down his head: but the next instant recovering something like his habitual insolent confidence, he said, "I thought I might make use of your friendship—it was merely as a loan—I took it—I meant to have told you—but such a trifle slipped my memory——"

Sir Frederick Latham turned his back upon the Viscount: it was with the coldest scorn that he did so: he disdained a reply to such a wretched tissue of sophistical excuses: he would have considered himself degraded by offering a comment upon them.

"Anastatia," he said, but speaking distantly and severely, "it is evident I have done you wrong in this instance. Circumstances were however against you. A felon brother makes his own infamy to redound upon his sister. Would that I were enabled to demand your pardon for the suspicion which in this respect had naturally arisen in my mind, but which after all has turned out to be so unjust towards yourself. It is true that you have not conspired to plunder me: but you well know, Anastatia, that there can be no doubt as to your guilt in another respect. Just now you admitted that you had been very culpable towards me. Therefore must we separate!"

"Is there no pardon—no forgiveness?" asked Anastatia in bitterest anguish of mind, at the same time joining her hands in the most fervid appeal. "I know that I deceived you——"

"Enough, Anastatia!" interrupted the merchant, with an implacable expression of countenance, though inwardly he was moved: "the very subject itself forbids discussion! I do not say to you, 'Go with that felon brother of your's!'—but I bid you depart hence in the course of this day. *He* is about to relieve my dwelling of the pestilential atmosphere which hangs around his criminal presence."

"Sir Frederick, you must be obeyed," faltered Anastatia, the tears streaming down her cheeks, and her bosom convulsed with sobs: "and perhaps I deserve it all for having concealed that secret from you. But still methinks the chastisement is severe—it is a terrible one for an imprudence——"

"An imprudence, Anastatia?" cried the merchant angrily. "Dare you thus lightly denominate the profligacy——you see that you compel me to speak out——"

"Sir Frederick," interrupted Lady Anastatia, suddenly dashing away her tears, and drawing herself up with an air of feminine dignity blended with indignation,—"this is language which even from you I cannot and will not tolerate! I repeat, my conduct was marked with imprudence perhaps—but only in one sense. It was because on the day when—a year back—you desired me to desist from dealing with Madame Angelique, and when you hinted at the reasons, I did not frankly confess to you at the time that in utter ignorance of the character of that establishment——"

"Good heavens! what is this that I hear?" exclaimed Sir Frederick: and he literally staggered back as if smitten a blow. "Speak, Anastatia!—tell me! The person whom you met there—he whom before your marriage as well as subsequently——"

"Ask him, Sir Frederick—ask him!" exclaimed Anastatia: "he is here—he will tell the truth—he will not see his own sister trampled down into the dust! Ask him, I say, who it was that I met at Madame Angelique's house!"

But Sir Frederick Latham waited not for whatsoever response the Viscount would have given to this appeal. A wild cry of joy burst from the lips of the City merchant: it seemed as if all in a moment his nature had become changed: his business-like coldness vanished—his countenance grew full of the expression of excited feelings; and flinging his arms round Anastatia's neck, he exclaimed, "Pardon! pardon!"

It was now a most affecting scene. That proud scion of the moneyocracy was melted at the blissful thought that his wife, the lovely daughter of the aristocracy, was after all worthy of him;—and *she* forgot everything except the one idea that she was restored to her husband's confidence. And both alike forgot for several minutes the presence of Lord Rushbrook, who, retreating into a window recess, sat watching this scene with an interest which though deep, was nevertheless altogether selfish; for it occurred to him that while there was peace-making in one quarter, there might be forgiveness for himself.

And now Sir Frederick Latham led his wife into another window-recess; and there they sat down and conversed together. It was the moment for explanations; and Anastatia's were given in the following manner:—

"You remember, my dear husband, that the first incident which rendered you intimate with our family, was that dreadful circumstance of my brother's crime—the forgery which he committed in the name of the Marquis of Swalecliffe. That bill fell into your hands: my father went to you—and you promised to save my brother from exposure. But the Marquis of Swalecliffe himself appeared to be inexorable. My brother was not really upon the Continent; he was concealed at the house of his tailor, M. Bertin. Oh, how painful it is for me to review all these things! And yet it is needful now: for the explanation must be given. Yes—do not interrupt me: I will proceed. My father and mother had vowed that never again would they see Robert: he dared not come to the house—he dared not go to you:—what was he to do in that fearful dilemma? He wrote a letter to me: he besought me to meet him: he told me that my own milliner, who lived next door to his temporary lodging, would arrange an interview. Utterly unsuspicious of the frightful risk which my reputation was incurring, I went to Madame Angelique's. I dared not mention my brother's name: for he knew not at the time, nor did I, whether the Marquis of Swalecliffe might not have given information to the police to capture him; and it was therefore requisite to use every possible precaution. I merely asked for the gentleman who was waiting to see me. Oh, that Robert should have so frightfully perilled the good name of his own sister!"

Anastatia's tears rained down her cheeks. Sir Frederick, with more kindness than he had ever displayed towards her, besought her to desist from her explanations, for that he himself was perfectly satisfied: but again wiping away her tears, she insisted upon proceeding.

"I saw Robert there—I met him in that place, which I little indeed suspected to be a scene of gilded infamy. He wrote a letter to the Marquis of Swalecliffe, dated from Brussels, and beseeching him to be merciful. This letter Robert implored me to forward to the Marquis, with a note from myself to the effect that I would receive whatsoever reply his lordship might vouchsafe. In that note which I penned to the Marquis, I added a prayer in support of the one my brother had already addressed to him. His lordship sent me a prompt answer. He said that for my sake he would do that which otherwise he had been resolved not to do. It was necessary that I should see my brother again, to communicate this response; and I saw him at the same place. Two or three times subsequently I saw him there, to report how the negotiation was progressing with yourself. Through your means the difficulty was settled, and my brother in due time affected to have returned from the Continent. Now, my dear husband, you comprehend how it was that I visited the interior of Madame Angelique's establishment on a few occasions prior to my marriage."

"And doubtless, Anastatia," observed Sir Frederick, "it was for a similar reason, after marriage, when your profligate brother again fell into difficulties, and when some usurious attorney threatened to proceed against him criminally——"

"Yes," responded Anastatia, "again did he pretend to fly to the Continent—again was it given out that he had gone to Paris or Brussels, that the officers of the law might be thrown off the scent. You remember, my dear husband, you strictly forbade me to hold any communication with my brother: but what could I do when he privately transmitted to me the most pathetic letters, declaring that he was in poverty—imploring me to see him? In a word, I went! Alas, it was so easy to pretext a visit to my milliner's; and as heaven is my witness, I suspected not the character of that house! And I am convinced, my dear husband, that by many and many a lady-friend of mine was its character equally unsuspected——"

"No doubt, Anastatia," interjected Sir Frederick; "and it was by the merest accident that I myself one day learnt from the impertinent communicativeness of some fashionable debauchee the infamous traffic which Madame Angelique was carrying on. I was astounded; and as a matter of duty I at once warned you of the character of that house."

"And I also was astounded!" answered Anastatia; "and I had not the moral courage to make you that confession which, if candidly given at the time, would have saved us so much misery to-day. But a sense of shame—deep burning shame,—or shall I say wounded modesty—sealed my tongue. I could not look my husband in the face and confess to him that I had penetrated within the walls of that den of infamy. I therefore held my peace. But, Oh! when next I saw my brother, how bitterly did I reproach him for the frightful risk which he had made me run! Alas! you know his manner—he endeavoured to laugh it flippantly away—and then he pleaded ignorance of the nature of that establishment; and if I did not altogether believe him, at least I forgave him. Yet ever since that day on which your revelation

of the infamy of that establishment came like a thunderbolt upon my ears, I have been haunted with terrors lest you should discover that only secret of my life which I studied to conceal from you. At last the extortioner came; and then a great battle took place within me. I longed to reveal everything to you: but I had not the moral courage to do it. Alas, no! I had not!—and I submitted to that villanous demand. You know the rest."

"And now, my dear Anastatia," responded Sir Frederick, taking his wife's hand and pressing it to his lips, "it is my turn to give you explanations. I will tell you how my suspicions were aroused—how they were strengthened—how they were fostered."

Sir Frederick accordingly narrated all those incidents which have been described to the reader,—how he had first missed the contents of his cash-box—how he had examined the papers in the desk—how he had visited Madame Angelique—how he had traced some of his lost bank-notes to Lord Rushbrook's possession—and how he had discovered the final secret from the false Lascar.

"It is I who have now to ask your pardon, my Anastatia," added the merchant, "for having violated the sanctity of your writing desk."

"You were justified," answered the lady; "and moreover this is not merely the day of revelations, but also the day of forgiveness."

"And to a certain extent," rejoined Sir Frederick,—"for your sake—at least so far as forgiveness in such circumstances *can* extend—shall it be accorded to that guilty one who has been the cause of so much mischief."

Meanwhile Lord Rushbrook had remained sitting in the window-recess: but he had not caught a single syllable of all that was thus taking place between his sister and his brother-in-law. The merchant approached him, and spoke in the following terms:—

"It were a mere waste of words to endeavour to reason with your lordship upon the profligacies and villanies of the career which you have been pursuing. The perils and difficulties of the past operate not with you as a salutary warning for the present or the future. What conduct could have been more abominable than your's when you would even have sacrificed the reputation of your own sister to the selfishness of your personal safety? Because you could not stir abroad at the time, you induced her to meet you in a place of infamy,—where, if you had the ordinary feelings of a man, your blood would boil with indignation at the idea of your pure-minded sister ever having set her foot! I fear that you are incorrigible, my lord; for this last act of your's—the robbery of your own sister's husband—a felon's foulest crime—proves you to be so thoroughly black-hearted and unprincipled that there is no hope for you!"

Anastatia had remained in the window-recess, where she was now weeping and sobbing: the sounds of her grief were wafted to the ear of her husband; and Sir Frederick, turning upon her a look of such kindness and compassion as never before he had displayed, said, "Weep not, Anastatia!—your brother is not worthy of these tears!"

Viscount Rushbrook, having a presentiment that something was about to be done for him, thought it better to preserve the humblest demeanour; and indeed he was completely overwhelmed with shame and confusion, notwithstanding his recent endeavour to carry off the affair with an insolent self-sufficient flippancy.

"I know that I have behaved bad, Sir Frederick," he said: "but look at my position! An appearance to keep up, and nothing to maintain it with—or at least only such a beggarly income that any small tradesman is better off than I! Come—you have said enough in the shape of reproach——I am glad it is all right between you and Anastatia——"

"Lord Rushbrook, listen to me!" interrupted the merchant; "for this scene shall now be brought to an end. It is totally impossible that you can ever again set foot within these walls: nor will I permit you—if it be possible for me to prevent it—to remain in the British metropolis, where your proceedings are so incessantly calculated to damage every one who is connected with you. I have a proposition to make: accept or refuse it as you will. If you choose to go upon the Continent, I will make you an allowance of one thousand pounds a year: but it shall be paid in monthly portions, and only to yourself personally—not by written order nor cheque—so that there may be a guarantee that you remain altogether in Paris, or wheresoever else you may choose to fix your abode. But if, on the other hand, you refuse this proposition, I warn you, Lord Rushbrook, that you will receive no farther pecuniary assistance from me; and whatsoever difficulty you may plunge yourself into, you must bear the consequences of. Decide this moment!—and if you accept my terms, you will leave the British metropolis to-morrow."

We need hardly inform the reader that Viscount Rushbrook was only too glad to accept an offer which promised him so liberal a permanent addition to the limited allowance he received from his father; and he took his departure from Tudor House.

When he was gone, Anastatia expressed her warmest gratitude to her husband for the munificence he had thus displayed towards her brother, as well as for his great leniency and forbearance in tacitly pardoning him for the foul robbery which had been brought to light.

"These incidents, my dear Anastatia," answered the merchant, "although so painful, may not have been without their uses. In the first place, your erring brother will be compelled to leave London, where he has constantly disgraced and imperilled himself; and let us hope that with a handsome income in a foreign clime, he may enter upon a new path. In the second place, your soul, Anastatia, is now relieved from the necessity of maintaining a secret which you were always afraid would transpire; and in the third place, methinks that our hearts have been drawn nearer towards each other than ever they were before. Certain it is that I feel different towards you! There may have been pride and coolness in my former demeanour—I have treated you too little as a wife and a friend: but henceforth it shall be different!"

Anastatia threw herself into her husband's arms; and he folded her to his breast with a real and loving tenderness.

DAME ROQUETTE.

CHAPTER CXXVIII.

THE STETHOSCOPE.

We must now return to that Chateau in the south of France, where Lady Octavian Meredith had for some while been staying with M. Volney and his daughter Clarine. The reader will not have forgotten the many extraordinary incidents which were revealed to Zoe's knowledge at that Chateau,—how M. Volney had, long years back, amidst the wild sublimities of Alpine scenery, taken the life of the author of his dishonour—and how Alfred Delorme, the son of that murdered victim, had been led by a variety of circumstances to bestow his love upon Clarine. It was through Zoe's representations, be it likewise remembered, that M. Volney had finally assented to the union of his daughter with the young Viscount Delorme: but he resolved that immediately after the bridal he would repair to some far-off spot,—there to bury himself and his sorrows, as well as his remorse, for the remainder of his existence. But to Zoe only was M. Volney's dreadful secret communicated: Clarine remained in perfect ignorance of the stupendous crime that sat upon her father's soul: while Alfred Delorme was equally far from suspecting that the father of her whom he loved and wooed, was his own deceased sire's murderer.

On the night when Alfred Delorme's presence in the Chateau was discovered, he had penetrated thither in a fit of utter desperation, to obtain an interview with Clarine that he might induce her to revoke the decision she had conveyed to him in the letter she had penned to old Marguerite's dictation. He was in a state of mind which forbade the exercise of the prudence and caution previously observed in his stealthy visits to the chateau; and thus was his presence detected. But, after all, the incident was a fortunate one, inasmuch as it brought about the *denouement* we have already described; and on the morning after that eventful night, Alfred Delorme repaired to the chateau to learn M. Volney's decision. It was given; and he beheld himself the acknowledged suitor for the hand of Clarine. M. Volney proposed that the bridal should be celebrated with the least possible delay; and this was a proposition to which the young couple were by no means likely to offer any objection.

A fortnight passed; and Alfred Delorme was a daily visitor at the Chateau. M. Volney had a difficult as well as painful part to play. Zoe comprehended it: she could not help pitying him—but she regarded it as a portion of that chastisement which heaven decreed that he should experience in this world for the crime he had committed. In order to avoid the suspicion that he any longer objected to the marriage of his daughter with that young nobleman—in order likewise to avoid throwing a damp upon the spirits of the loving couple—M. Volney forced himself to be frequently in their society; so that he was now more in the sitting-room and less in his own study than was his wont at any other period during his residence at the Chateau. But what efforts it cost him to look Alfred Delorme calmly in the face—to meet the looks of him whom his own hand had rendered fatherless!

A fortnight had passed, we said—and it was now the eve of the day fixed for the bridal. This was to be solemnized with comparative privacy; and after the ceremony the Viscount was to bear his bride away to his own palatial mansion in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau. To Zoe only had M. Volney spoken of his own intentions—namely, to repair to some distant and retired spot, where he might dwell for the remainder of his existence. Clarine and the Viscount thought that he purposed to continue at the Chateau; and they entertained the hope that in process of time he would return to his own seat, also in the vicinage of Fontainebleau. As for Zoe herself,—she had agreed to accompany her friend Clarine and the Viscount to their future home, and there to remain with them for a few weeks, until she should have formed some other plan for her future arrangements.

It was the eve of the bridal—the month of September was drawing towards a close—and on a beautiful afternoon Zoe and Clarine were walking forth together. Alfred had passed several hours that day, as usual, at the Chateau; and he had then gone to some neighbouring town, to make a few purchases of such articles as he required for wedding-presents, and which could not be obtained in the village. Thus was it that the two young ladies were rambling alone together amidst that beautiful scenery in the neighbourhood of the Pyrenees.

"To-morrow, my dear Clarine," said Lady Octavian Meredith, "will be a happy day for you! You will accompany to the altar one who is in every way worthy of the devoted love you bear him; and you are about to enter on a complete change of existence. It is no longer in a lonely chateau that you will henceforth reside—but in a sumptuous mansion——"

"And you will accompany me thither, my dearest friend!" said the happy and grateful Clarine; "and though you have hinted at other arrangements to be carried into effect after a while, yet shall I hope to keep you altogether with me until——"

But here Clarine stopped short,—evidently aware that the enthusiasm of her feelings towards her friend Zoe had borne her suddenly upon the frontier of delicate ground.

"Until a change takes place in my own position, you would say?" observed Lady Octavian, in accents of mildest melancholy. "If you mean, dear Clarine, that happiness with my husband yet awaits me in this world, you are mistaken——Oh, you are mistaken! The only change to which I now look forward, is that which the hand of death itself must accomplish."

"Speak not thus, my beloved friend!" exclaimed Clarine, the tears trickling down her cheeks: "you know not how it afflicts me to listen to these mournful presentiments from your lips. You are so mild and resigned——"

"Yes—resigned," observed Zoe, "because with Christian fortitude can I look my destiny in the face."

"If you were to give way to lamentations and repinings, and to vehement outbursts," continued Clarine, "they would not have upon me the same effect which this mild placid melancholy of your's produces. Oh! believe me, dearest Zoe, I feel

deeply, deeply on your account! Therefore pray listen to me. I am convinced that you entertain unfounded ideas in respect to your own health. The mind is suffering; and in its sufferings influences the body: but if the mind were restored to its natural tone, the physical sufferings would themselves cease. You have lately looked better than I have seen you ever since you first came to the Chateau. There is a colour upon your cheeks ——Now do not interrupt me!—not for worlds would I deceive you—and I positively declare that it is not a hectic glow, spot-like and unnatural—but it is a natural bloom shading gradually off——"

"Enough, Clarine!" interrupted Zoe gently. "I comprehend the excellence of your motive—I appreciate all your kindness. But there is within me a feeling, which I cannot explain, but which is nevertheless an unmistakable warning——"

"Would to heaven," exclaimed Clarine vehemently, "that you would take proper professional advice upon this subject! If it be really as you think, there can be no harm in your receiving the conviction that it is so: but if, on the other hand, you should find that you have deceived yourself—Ah, dearest Zoe! will it not be your duty to cling to life? Did you not a little while back assure me that if you were walking on the edge of a precipice, and that if there were danger of your falling into the abyss, you would retreat rapidly,—because you hold life to be a sacred gift from heaven—a gift which you are to preserve with all possible care until it be taken away from you by Him who originally gave it!"

"This is true, Clarine!" answered Zoe, slowly and thoughtfully.

"Therefore, my beloved friend," continued Mademoiselle Volney, "however bitter may be your cup of affliction, you are too good and have too profound a sense of your religious obligation, to put an end to your own existence. But, on the other hand, ought you to suffer yourself to fade and perish prematurely, if there be on earth the means of restoration? That God who breathed into our mortal clay the breath of life, has stored the world with herbs and minerals and various substances, expressly intended for the preservation of that life by warding off disease, or grappling with it and conquering it; and within the scope of human intelligence he has given a skill for comprehending how all these curatives and preventives may be used. What is more beautiful than the medical art?—does it not, with all its appliances and its wondrous capabilities, prove itself to be an effluence from heaven?—and does not the mere existence of that art teach us the highest moral lessons? If we may not suddenly escape from life by means of suicide, neither must we suffer ourselves to perish under the influence of illness or disease without invoking the aid of that sublime art which heaven has associated with the destiny of man."

Zoe listened with mingled interest, admiration, and solemnity, to the eloquent language which was thus flowing from her friend's lips. She recognised all the truthfulness of the reasoning: the whole matter assumed a new aspect to her view; and her soul received the conviction that if she felt it to be wrong to harbour even the slightest thought of self-destruction, it was scarcely less repugnant to the will of heaven to yield herself up to the ravages of disease without a single effort to baffle them.

"You have convinced me, my dear Clarine!" Zoe at length said, in a low deep voice: "you have opened my eyes to a new and sublime truth! Yes—I will follow your counsel——"

Clarine, in the enthusiasm of her joyous feelings, caught Zoe's hands in her own, and pressed them fervidly.

"This very day—this very hour, dearest, dearest friend," cried Mademoiselle Volney, "must you enter upon this new path. Do you not remember Alfred told us yesterday that Baron Louis, the celebrated Parisian physician—he who has acquired such renown in the use of the stethoscope—has arrived in the village to pass a few weeks for the benefit of his own health? Come at once!—let us proceed to his residence! Nothing will now satisfy me until you have received this eminent man's opinion!"

After all that had just taken place—with the new impression upon her mind—and considering the assurances she had within the last few minutes given to her friend, Zoe could not possibly refuse the proposition that was thus made. They were close upon the outskirt of the village; and in the neighbourhood was the picturesque little villa which Baron Louis had hired for the few weeks he purposed to remain in that district. With a palpitating heart Zoe suffered herself to be led along; and with enthusiastic hopefulness did Clarine conduct her beloved friend towards the villa. It was now about five o'clock in the afternoon; and Baron Louis was just returning from an excursion on horseback. On learning the object of the two ladies—or rather we should say one of them—he courteously invited them to enter,—though with a smile giving them to understand that when visiting this Pyrenean district he had no thought of pursuing his professional avocations. Zoe would have retired: but the zealous Clarine led her onward; and they entered the neatly furnished parlour of the villa.

Baron Louis awaited such explanations as Lady Octavian Meredith might have to give him. She hesitated and spoke nervously: but Clarine came to her aid. The young lady said enough to make the physician comprehend that Zoe had certain causes for sorrow and unhappiness, and that she had recently fancied she was labouring under a pulmonary complaint. The Baron proceeded to make the usual examination by means of the stethoscope; and Clarine awaited the result with perhaps far more anxiety than that which Zoe herself experienced. At length the opinion was delivered; and it was to the effect that Lady Octavian Meredith needed naught but skilful and competent professional treatment in order to be restored to perfect physical health. Zoe was well nigh overcome by her feelings on receiving this intelligence: but Clarine clapped her hands with an almost childish ebullition of joy, and folded her beloved friend in her arms.

When the first gush of feelings on the part of the young ladies was over and when they grew somewhat more composed, they both thanked the learned physician for the trouble he had taken and the delicate kindness he had shown in the proceeding; and then Zoe placed a considerable fee

upon the mantel-piece. But Baron Louis would not accept the amount: he declared, with all that exquisite politeness which characterizes a French gentleman, that not being in this neighbourhood for a professional purpose, he could only exercise his skill in the way of friendship, and therefore would not think of being rewarded. In short, he used so many arguments that it was impossible for Zoe to persevere in her endeavour to force the fee upon him; and with renewed expressions of gratitude she took her departure, accompanied by her friend Clarine.

"I know not, my dear Zoe," said Mademoiselle Volney, as they were returning homeward to the Chateau, "that I ever experienced more heartfelt satisfaction than at the instant when this good and kind man pronounced his opinion. Oh, what a change of prospect is now opened before your mental vision! But good heavens! you are weeping —— Oh! how you are weeping, my sweet friend!—and there is an agony in the source of these tears!"

"If it be heaven's will that my life should be prolonged to a span greater than I had anticipated," answered Lady Octavian Meredith, "I must submit. But, Oh, Clarine! how can you expect me to be joyous and happy? There might have been that feeling for a moment—and yet I know not whether there was: but now that I have leisure for reflection, I am compelled to ask myself—and I ask you likewise—what have I worth living for?"

"You must live in the hope that happiness may yet be your's," replied Mademoiselle Volney. "Ah! my dear friend, I am about to say some thing which costs me a pang: but I am impelled by a sense of duty. I love you: a variety of circumstances has tended to establish a firm bond of friendship and affection between us—a bond which, I hope, death alone shall be enabled to break; and therefore does it afflict me to think of separation. Nevertheless we must separate — and perhaps sooner too than I had expected—because, my dear Zoe, it is your duty to return to your husband."

"What! to render him unhappy?" exclaimed Lady Octavian. "Ah, my dear Clarine! if that physician has just now told me that I may expect to live, you are on the other hand telling me how to invite the presence of death in the shortest and most effective manner; for my heart would break if I were to return to England to encounter all that I passed through for some months ere I came upon the Continent! I had hoped to die soon, Clarine —— yes, I had hoped to die soon — in order that I might leave Octavian free to follow the bent of his own inclinations."

"You have already made too many sacrifices on that point, dear Zoe; and you must make no more. It is not for you to martyrize yourself utterly and completely for the sake of others: but it is for *them* to make sacrifices also. Have you not told me that your husband is naturally good and generous, and that Christina Ashton is herself a model of purity and virtue?—and if it is with such beings that you have to deal, wherefore should all the sufferings and the sacrifices be upon your side? Think you that your husband will not do everything to conquer his own passion?—and think you that Christina's sense of delicacy, her feminine pride, and her good feeling, have not already led her to stifle whatsoever love Lord Octavian may have inspired her with?"

"Ah, Clarine!" responded Zoe, "can you ask me these questions,—you who have loved and still love so tenderly and so well? Did you find it so easy to stifle love in your bosom? did even a father's mandates or injunctions——"

"Zoe," interrupted Clarine, speaking in a low half-hushed voice, "it is the truth which you are proclaiming from your lips; and everything you state affords an additional proof of the weakness of us poor mortals. But, good heavens! what will you do? The skill of science has just ascertained the fact that your young life may be prolonged until it grows old: and are you to pass all these years in misery—voluntarily separated from the husband whom you love—expatriated afar from your sire, your friends, and acquaintances? Oh, the affection which I bear for you might prompt me selfishly to rejoice at the prospect of having you altogether and for ever with me: but, on the other hand, I have a regard for your happiness; and that very friendship which I experience for you, will prevent me from seeing you make the most unheard-of sacrifices, and martyrizing yourself to an extent that has no parallel in the history of woman!"

"And yet," said Zoe, in that same sweet voice of mild resignation in which for a long time past she had been accustomed to speak, "those sacrifices must be made—that self-martyrization must be accomplished! If circumstances prevent me from ensuring my own happiness, I may at least be permitted the satisfaction of doing my best to ensure the happiness of others. And now, my dear friend, you will oblige me by abandoning this topic for the present. It is not on the eve of your bridal day that you are to be saddened by the infectious influence of my sorrows. Besides," continued the amiable lady, smiling, "I wish to be gay—and—and—happy——as happy as possible on this occasion! Am I not to accompany you to Fontainebleau? and shall we not some days or weeks hence have ample leisure to discuss all the circumstances which regard myself? *Then*, my dear Clarine, you shall proffer me your counsel: but for the present," added Zoe, somewhat abruptly, "let us avert our attention from the subject."

"At least there is one thing you promise me?" said Mademoiselle Volney,—"one thing upon which I must insist,—that you follow the advice which Baron Louis has given, and that you will seek the earliest opportunity of obtaining competent medical treatment? Doubtless at Fontainebleau we shall find trustworthy and talented practitioners——"

"Yes, Clarine," answered Zoe, "I shall fulfil my duty in that respect: for you have this evening convinced me by your eloquent reasoning that the life of us mortals is not our own to be disposed of as we will; but it is a trust confided to us, to be cherished, watched over, and cared for to the utmost of our power."

Mademoiselle Volney, yielding to her friend's wishes, abandoned the topic upon which they had previously been conversing, although it was with reluctance that she did so; for she experienced the warmest affection for Lady Octavian Meredith, and she did not like the mood into which Zoe had relapsed, nor the representations she had made

since that interview with the physician the result of which Clarine had hoped would have a very different effect upon her friend. And now, as she glanced furtively at Zoe's countenance, while they were bending their way back to the Chateau, she could not help thinking there was something unnatural in the serenely sad and placidly mournful air of pensive resignation which sat upon the features of Lady Octavian Meredith.

CHAPTER CXXIX.

THE FOREST.

THE last beams of the setting sun, on that same September evening of which we have just been writing, were flickering in ruddy hues upon the western outskirts of one of those great forests which are still to be found in the southern parts of France. The progress of civilization creates so many new wants for mankind, that it renders it needful to redeem as much territory as possible from its wild and savage primitive condition; and thus is it that the great forests of all well-populated countries are gradually yielding to the axe; and the space which has been occupied by giant trees, whose growth indicated the lapse of centuries, has been progressively brought into cultivation that the golden harvest might wave in its luxuriance. But still, as we have just now said, there are many of these grand old forests still remaining—and some in the south of France. We do not mean woods of limited extent, nor of puny growth—nor spaces with mere patches and isolated groups of stunted trees upon them—such as in England we find dubbed by the name of "forests," and rather indicating what might have once been there than what now exists. But we are speaking of forests in the true meaning of the term,—miles and miles of uninterrupted mazes of stately trees, forming in the warmer seasons of the year one vast canopy of verdure through which the sunbeams cannot penetrate.

It was upon such a forest as this that the last rays from the west were flickering in ruddy hues as a postchaise-and-four entered upon the road intersecting the vast maze of verdure. The horses had been changed at a village which stood at the entrance of the forest: the two postilions cracked their whips to inspire the fresh animals, which appeared to be of somewhat sluggish disposition: a valet in plain clothes was seated on the box; and a young man, of exceedingly handsome appearance, was the sole occupant of the interior of the chaise. Not to observe any unnecessary mystery, we may as well at once inform our reader that this was Lord Octavian Meredith, who was on his way to the Chateau where he knew that his wife resided,—that wife whom he was prepared to rejoin! With arms folded across his chest, and in a profoundly meditative mood, was Lord Octavian lying back in the vehicle. The forest was plunged in obscurity, though not so complete as to render the road difficult to be followed, or to entail the necessity of having the lamps lighted. Besides, as there are always the same postilions for the same stages, these men were perfectly conversant with the route, and could pursue it blindfold. Yet the forest was obscure, as we have said; and inside the vehicle it was quite dark. If, however, it had been possible to study Octavian's countenance under such circumstances, it would have been perceived that though exceedingly pale and bearing the traces of a strong mental conflict of very recent date, it wore an expression of firmest resolve. Yes—he had determined to rejoin Zoe: he believed that Christina loved him not—that she had trifled coquetishly with his feelings—that her heart was not so thoroughly good and ingenuous as he had originally deemed it to be; and thus every hope being destroyed in that quarter, it was with a species of desperation that he had plunged headlong as it were into the performance of the duty which he owed to his wife.

Deeper into the forest did the equipage proceed: the stage was an unusually long one—for the unbroken maze of trees stretched onward for a distance of thirteen or fourteen miles; and in the interval there occurred no post-house for relays. The chaise had accomplished about half that distance — the obscurity had now deepened into almost total darkness—when on a sudden the equipage came to a stop, but with a jerking abruptness that threw Meredith forward from his seat. The next moment he heard the plunging of horses — ejaculations of terror mingled with others of threats—the trampling of feet—the sounds of blows—and then the report of fire-arms. All these alarming noises were so rapid in succession—or indeed might almost be described as so blended—that Octavian found the conflict over by the time he leaped forth from the vehicle. For a conflict it really was, though he scarcely comprehended its circumstances, and knew nothing at all of its results until a little while afterwards. And this was the reason,—that no sooner had he sprung forth, than a desperate blow was dealt him either by a bludgeon or the butt-end of a pistol; and he was stricken down senseless.

As Lord Octavian slowly came back to consciousness, he gradually grew aware that he was lying by the side of the road: and the beams of a lantern moving about, showed him the dark shape of the vehicle. He heard footsteps: they were those of a single person; and by this person the lantern was being carried. Meredith's ideas were at first in a bewildering confusion; but conspicuous amongst them was the sense of extreme danger; and he therefore lay perfectly still until he might glean something more of the circumstances which surrounded him.

A pain in his head reminded the young nobleman of how he had been stricken down: and fortunate for him was it that he had on his hat at the time—or else the blow which merely stunned would have proved fatal. All was silent, with the exception of those footsteps that accompanied the movements of the lantern. There was not so much as the impatient stamping of a horse, nor the rattling of the harness. But no wonder: for by the light of the lantern Meredith in a few minutes perceived that the horses had been detached from the chaise, and were no longer there. At the same time he observed that the lantern was borne by a female; and that as she carried it in one hand, she supported herself with a stick held in the other. He could not as yet see her face: but he beheld

enough to convince him that she was a crone bowed with age.

He watched her movements, not choosing as yet to give any sign of life which might attract her attention, for fear lest she should be connected with the ruffians who had perpetrated the outrage, and that they might still be within the summoning range of her voice. Of the extent of this outrage he was as yet ignorant—although he dreaded the worst, because he beheld not his valet nor the postilions, and because he recollected the violence of the blows and the report of the fire-arms which he had heard. Raising himself very, very gently upon his elbow, he endeavoured to penetrate more scrutinizingly through the gloom which prevailed around save and except where the lantern glimmered like a will-o'-the-wisp. The crone was stooping down: something dark lay underneath the lantern—Octavian shuddered with the horrible suspicion which swept through his brain — but the next instant he shuddered more deeply and coldly still, as the rays of that lantern fell upon the white face of a human being——and he recognised his own valet!

In a moment he was upon his feet: he sprang towards the old woman, who shrieked out in affright; and clutching her violently by the arm, he exclaimed in the French tongue, "Wretch! are you plundering the dead whom your accomplices have murdered?"

"No, sir—no! heaven forbid!" responded the crone, with so sudden a regaining of her self-possession that Meredith felt convinced she was innocent of the charge he had levelled against her. "I am here to render assistance, if possible—but it is too late for the *others*—you only appear to be safe."

"Too late!" exclaimed Meredith, horrified at the idea which these words conveyed. "God forbid! Let us see."

He snatched the lantern from the woman's hand; and he now perceived that his first impression was correct, that she was a very aged crone and that the exceeding ugliness of her countenance might well under existing circumstances be taken for doubly and trebly sinister in its aspect. Lord Octavian—holding the lantern high up, so as to fling its light upon the scene—prepared himself for something dreadful: and he prepared himself not in vain. Near one of the forewheels of the chaise, lay his unfortunate valet: the mark where a pistol bullet had entered, was in the middle of the forehead; and thence the blood was trickling. A little farther on lay one of the postilions, with his skull horribly shattered, evidently by a bludgeon; and farther on still was the other postilion, lying lifeless over the trunk of a tree which had been cut down in such a manner as to fall completely across the road. The cause of the sudden stoppage of the vehicle was thus explained; and from the position in which this last-mentioned postilion was found, Meredith concluded that he must at the outset have been pitched over the horse's head by the abruptness with which the animal had come to a full stop on encountering the tree. *Then*, no doubt, the villains had set upon the unfortunate postilion, and had despatched him on the spot; for his skull was likewise battered in.

Such was the harrowing spectacle which in the ghastliness and fearfulness of its details was shadowed forth to the young nobleman by the light of the lantern. The horses, as we have already said, were gone; and on pursuing his inspection, he perceived that his own trunks and that of his unfortunate valet had been carried off. Bethinking himself of something which had not before smitten him, he felt about his person: his watch and his purse were gone—a pocket-book containing bank-notes had likewise been taken from him—the very rings from his fingers had been stripped off—he was completely despoiled, even to a gold pencil-case which he was wont to carry in his waistcoat-pocket. He now examined the person of his valet: but as he had only too well anticipated, it was similarly rifled. The entire investigation of the scene and of all these particulars, had occupied but a few minutes:—stupendously shocking as the details were, there was, alas! no difficulty in embracing them with a too frightful accuracy at a few rapid glances; and all the while Octavian so managed as not to lose sight of the crone. For if she had attempted to escape he would at once have brought her back; and he would naturally have regarded the circumstance as a proof of her guilty complicity with the perpetrators of the whole satanic outrage. But she showed no inclination to quit the spot; and now Octavian accosted her once more.

"How came you here?" he asked, narrowly watching her countenance as he held the lantern up for the purpose.

"I live in a cottage hard by," she responded; "and hearing a noise in the road, I got up, dressed myself, and came out. I thought at first it was a carriage which had upset: but on reaching the spot I found how dreadful was the work that had been done; and I was looking to see if any of the victims yet lived, when you started up and accosted me."

Her countenance changed not in a suspicious manner; and even despite her hideous ugliness, there was upon it an expression of rude rough peasant-like frankness. She was very poorly clad: indeed her appearance was indicative of the utmost poverty. Her tale seemed probable enough; and Meredith was inclined to believe it.

"This is a dreadful crime which has been perpetrated," he said; "and I am bewildered how to act. Are here no habitations nearer than the villages at the entrance and at the extremity of the forest?"

"Only a few such poor cottages as the hut that I live in," was the woman's answer. "But perhaps some of the mounted police may come this way presently——"

"Does the forest bear a bad repute?" inquired Meredith.

"People have been sometimes robbed here," answered the woman; "but they have generally been solitary travellers, either on horse or foot; and I never before knew of such a desperate performance as this. I have lived for years and years in the depth of this forest—with my poor deceased husband for a long time—and since his death by myself: but I never till now knew of blood being shed. I suppose it is some gang that has gathered in the forest: but the police will soon hunt them down after such a crime as this."

Meredith suffered the old woman to go on talk-

ing without interruption, as he wished still to study her looks as much as possible in order to ascertain what degree of confidence he might place in her. She continued to address him with the same air of rude, uncouth, but honest bluntness which he had previously remarked; and thus his impression grew stronger and stronger in her favour.

"Do you think," he asked, "that I should be likely to obtain the loan of a horse at any one of the cottages of which you speak? I would in that case ride back to the village at the entrance of the forest——"

"A horse? No, sir!" exclaimed the woman. "They are only poor people like myself, who have huts in this forest: they get their little bit of a livelihood as woodmen——"

"Then what am I to do?" demanded Meredith, with a bewildered air.

Indeed he was sorely perplexed, and had every reason to find himself so. If he left that spot to walk to either of the villages, he might fall in with the brigands, who would most probably despatch him, as they already believed they had done and had intended to do. If he remained where he was, to await the arrival of the mounted police, the murderers might come back. His predicament was bewildering to a degree: he was utterly penniless—all his jewellery was gone—his pocket-book, containing his passport and other papers, had likewise disappeared—he had not even the means of proving his identity as an English nobleman and thus obtaining a supply of money at the next village if he were to bend his way thither. According to previous inquiries which he had made, he was full fifty miles from the chateau where his wife dwelt, and which he had hoped to reach at an early hour on the following morning. He was cruelly shocked and distressed likewise at the death of his valet and of the two unfortunate postilions; and he suffered severe pain from the blow received on the head.

"After all," he thought to himself, "the best thing I can do is to remain in the forest for the night, if I can obtain an asylum where I shall be in safety; and then in the morning I might get back to the village where the last relay was obtained. The landlord of the inn at which we stopped to take refreshments, would perhaps furnish me with funds to carry me forward to my destination: or the Mayor or some other local authority would have this much confidence in me. Even if the worst should happen, I could but remain at the inn until I had time to communicate with Zoe."

Such were the thoughts that now passed through the mind of the young nobleman; and having more or less come to a decision on the point, he again turned to the old woman, to whose hand he had in the meanwhile restored the lantern.

"Those villains have robbed me of everything I possess," he said; "and I have not at this moment the means of bestowing the slightest recompense upon any person at whose hands I might receive a civility. Do you think that one of the cottagers of whom you have spoken would give me an asylum for a few hours?"

"I am sure they would!" answered the crone with her rough air of confidence. "Though we are all poor in these parts, yet we are not savages——"

"Whose is the nearest cottage?" inquired Meredith.

"Mine, for that matter," responded the old woman; "and if you like to turn in and rest yourself there, you are truly welcome. But I can offer nothing more that the humblest accomodation; and as for recompense, a civil word at parting is everything that will be required by Dame Roquette."

"You shall have the civil word, Dame Roquette," answered Meredith; "and a much more substantial reward shall follow so soon as I obtain the means of bestowing it. We will not leave the remains of these unfortunate men to become a prey to the vermin or birds of the forest. Hold you the lantern while I drag the bodies into the chaise."

This task was shortly accomplished; and Meredith then said, "Now lead the way, good dame, to your abode; and I will follow"

The woman Roquette, carrying the lantern in her hand, hobbled off from the spot, leaning upon her stick; and plunging into the deeper forest mazes which skirted the road, she proceeded for a distance of about a mile. Meredith was just wondering how the noise of the conflict in the road could possibly have reached the ears of the old woman if her dwelling-place were thus remote, when she stopped at the door of what proved to be a little hovel. It stood so completely embowered in the depth of the forest, that even in the daytime a stranger in the district would have failed to notice that there was a human habitation there until he came altogether upon it. Dame Roquette pushed open the door; and Octavian followed her into the place.

The hut was divided into two compartments—one containing a great quantity of the small brushwood which the crone had gathered in the forest, and also a number of logs rudely chopped up. The other compartment—which was the larger of the two—displayed a meagre and wretched assortment of furniture, all of the roughest materials. There was a bed in one corner; and the half-opened door of a cupboard showed a scanty supply of food of the most frugal description.

"If it weren't for the kindness of the woodmen towards a poor lone body like me," said Dame Roquette, "I dont't know what would become of me. They give me logs for firing; and when they take their own faggots to the village in the hand-cart which half-a-dozen of them have in common amongst them, they take mine likewise. The forest-keepers are also good enough in their way; and often when I come home I find a loaf and a piece of cheese, with occasionally a hare or a rabbit, upon my table."

"Good heavens! what a life for a human being to lead!" thought Meredith to himself. "How little do the dwellers amidst the luxuries of great cities and towns know of the fearful struggles which so many of their fellow-creatures have to make to keep body and soul together!"

"You can have this room, sir—and welcome," continued Dame Roquette. "I will stretch myself on a bit of straw that there is amongst the faggots and logs."

"I will not deprive you, my good woman, of your resting-place. I could not do such a thing!" answered Meredith. "I will stretch myself on the

faggots there, and thanks for the accommodation. But you are sure——"

He was about to ask whether the crone was confident that the robbers were not likely to revisit her cottage: he however checked himself, as it struck him in the first place that there was something pusillanimous in the query—and in the second place that it was an useless one as she could not possibly tell what the lawless ruffians might do—unless indeed she were an accomplice of their's, which however he no longer suspected.

"Good night, dame," he said: and passing into the adjoining room, he closed the door of communication between the two compartments.

Octavian threw himself down upon the straw which lay on the ground in that place; but he had not been long there before his mind underwent a sudden and complete revulsion in respect to Dame Roquette. Something had struck him like a flash of lightning. She had told him, when they were in the road together, that on hearing certain noises she had got up, dressed herself, and issued forth. But this tale was far from being consistent with the fact that her humble pallet in the next room showed that it had not been disturbed that night: the patchwork coverlid was spread neatly and smoothly over the bedding; and the bolster, covered with the sheet of coarse unbleached linen, which may be seen in the humblest hovel in France, bore not the impression of a human head having reposed there.

The dame therefore had evidently told a falsehood—and a most unnecessary one if she were honest. Again too arose in Octavian's mind the thought that the hut was too far from the road for any sounds occurring in the one place to be heard at the other—especially by an old crone whose age forbade the belief that her sense of hearing was any of the keenest. And then too, even if she did hear the sounds, how could she possibly mistake them for the upsetting of a vehicle, when the loudest of the noises was the report of the firearms? All points considered, Meredith felt convinced that there was something wrong about the woman—perhaps even the very worst: namely, that she might be an accomplice of the brutal brigand murderers.

What course should he pursue? If he were suddenly to pounce upon her and accuse her of treachery, her cries might bring the ruffians to her succour, and to the accomplishment of his own destruction: for who could tell how close they might be in the vicinage of the hovel? But if on the other hand he were to endeavour to steal forth, she might hear him, and a similar result would ensue. Again, he thought to himself that if he lingered there the villains might come to the place—it might be their rendezvous—and they would perhaps despatch him for fear lest the information he might give should lead to their detection. All things considered, Octavian resolved to seize upon the old woman, and by threats of wreaking a prompt vengeance upon her, make her confess whatsoever he might be enabled to extort. But scarcely had he come to this determination, when his ear caught the sounds of footsteps approaching the cottage.

It will be deemed no derogation to his natural bravery if we admit that Meredith was for a moment seized with a mortal terror, as the hideous idea struck him that he was now indeed completely in the power of the murderers. But as that glacial shudder passed rapidly off, his first impulse was to seize upon a log of wood and sell his life as dearly as possible. He was enveloped in utter darkness; and scarcely had he snatched up the billet, when he heard the front door gently open. It was Dame Roquette stealing forth: the heavier footsteps outside instantaneously ceased: Octavian felt assured that she had encountered the brigands—she was telling them that he was there! The idea now struck him that he would seize the opportunity to attempt an escape by gliding forth and plunging into the mazes of the forest. He opened the door communicating with the room whence the old woman had just emerged: but the light was still burning there—he would be seen on crossing the threshold—bullets would be discharged at him—death would in that case be inevitable: he felt that he had better trust to the chapter of accidents. At the very instant that he came to this decision, he heard a man's voice say, "Well, go your ways now—and remember the business for to-morrow!"

"Yes, yes," answered three or four whispering voices: and then the sounds of retreating footsteps met Octavian's ears.

He still held the door of communication ajar; and now he heard the same voice which had just given the order to the gang to disperse, say in a low tone, "Do you really think he is asleep?"

"I believe so," replied Dame Roquette; "for he looked dreadfully tired, as well as completely overcome by the scene."

"Good!" rejoined the man. "If he sleeps there is no use in doing him a mischief, as he has nothing more to be robbed of. But we shall see."

Octavian gently closed the door, and at once laid himself down on the straw; for his mind was suddenly made up what course to adopt. He perceived that there was no intention to commit an unnecessary murder; he comprehended likewise that the man who had remained behind, and who appeared to be the chief of the gang, was going to confer with Dame Roquette; and he saw that if it were possible to hear their discourse he might not only ascertain what the contemplated business was for the morrow, but likewise glean enough to enable the police authorities to make a capture of the whole gang.

CHAPTER CXXX.

OCTAVIAN AND ZOE.

Lord Octavian Meredith knew perfectly well that circumstances were now compelling him to play a very perilous game: but all his fortitude and self-possession were at his command, especially as he believed and hoped there was now only one male ruffian to deal with in case of emergency. He deposited himself upon the straw, assuming the attitude of one who slept; he composed his features in a suitable manner—he breathed as if he were indeed an unconscious slumberer.

He heard the old woman and her ruffian companion steal into the hut: the outer door was then

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gently closed: the door of communication between the two rooms was next opened with an evident study to avoid making the slightest disturbance; and this was an additional proof to Meredith that an unnecessary crime was not contemplated. He kept his eyes closed: the footsteps of a man advanced towards him — but they were only just audible. The light was passed three or four times across his countenance: he moved not—he maintained the most perfect self-possession—his eyelids quivered not: he looked what he feigned to be——fast asleep. The ruffian retreated as noiselessly as he had entered: Meredith would not trust himself even to the slightest raising of an eyelid, for fear lest the robber should still be looking towards him; and he knew that the faintest disclosure of the eyeball would reflect the light of the lantern. The man passed out, and the door closed behind him—the whole proceeding being conducted with the extremest caution on his part.

Meredith now heard the voices of Dame Roquette and the man whispering in the adjoining room; and with the utmost caution did he move towards the door in the thin partition. There he listened. Never was breath more suspensefully held: never were ears more keenly set to catch the sounds of low speaking tongues. And as the eyes get accustomed to the darkness and gradually perceive objects through them, so do the ears get habituated as it were to the accents of the voice, however low the whispering may be: for it is thus that the human faculties at times develop their wondrous powers. So it was with Meredith now; and if he could not catch all that was being said in the adjoining room, he at least heard sufficient to make him aware of a most ramified piece of villany that was in embryo, and also sufficient to make him rejoice inwardly that he was enabled thus to listen.

Presently, when Octavian thought that the conversation betwixt the man and the woman in the adjoining room was drawing to a close, he was about to creep back to his place upon the straw, —but a question put by the male villain led him to tarry at the threshold a little longer.

"And after all, then," he said, "it was a false alarm?"

"Yes—no one passed the spot—no one came near it," replied Dame Roquette; "and there I consequently very soon was, with my lantern in my hands. I had just stripped the valet of his watch and purse when the gentleman himself came to his senses——"

"But you had previously rifled him likewise?"

"Of course!—or how could I have just now given you all the things I found about him? It was a wonder," continued Dame Roquette, "that he didn't come to his senses while I was dipping my hands into his pockets and pulling off his rings: but he did not. Ah! how he startled me for a moment when he afterwards came rushing towards me——"

"Oh, but you have got such a brazen hardihood!" rejoined her ruffian companion: "you are seldom or never taken aback!"

"Hush, hush!—not too loud!" said the dame.

"Oh, he was sleeping as soundly as possible," answered the chief of the gang: for such Meredith had discovered him actually to be. "And now I must be off—for I've got many good miles to ride before daylight. Remember all I have said!"

"Yes, yes—there's no fear," responded Dame Roquette. "Directly Moulin returns to-morrow, I will send round the word."

Meredith now considered it expedient to creep back to the straw; and this move he accomplished with a most scrupulous caution. About five minutes afterwards the brigand again entered the little room with the lantern in his hand: again did Meredith submit with admirable presence of mind to the process of having the light passed before his eyes; and the desperado retreated, with the full conviction that the young nobleman was sound asleep. He then issued from the cottage; and Octavian felt that he was now altogether safe.

He might have availed himself of the present opportunity to seize upon the old woman according to one of the ideas which had originally struck him: but he no longer thought it expedient to adopt this course. The facts he had learnt from the whispered conversation decided him upon going on altogether another tack. He therefore lay quiet: hour after hour passed—he felt not the slightest inclination to sleep—and the reader may rest assured that he did not voluntarily court the advance of slumber. The grey dawn of morning at length began to glimmer through a little square window which there was in the room where Octavian lay; and he now resolved to depart. He knocked at the partition-door: Dame Roquette, who was already up and dressed, bade him enter the room—and he did so. He assumed the most courteous demeanour—thanked her for her hospitality—and promised to take the earliest opportunity of rewarding her. She had already begun to prepare breakfast; and she invited him to remain to partake of it: but he declined, pleading his anxiety to get to the nearest village and continue his journey.

Bidding Dame Roquette farewell, Lord Octavian Meredith issued from the cottage, and made the best of his way through that part of the forest which led towards the road where the foul crime of the preceding night had been perpetrated. On reaching the spot he found half-a-dozen of the mounted police there: they had only just discovered the chaise and the hideous tragedy which its ghastly contents revealed. Meredith was at once enabled to give those fearful explanations which are already known to the reader; and the officer who was in command of the party requested the young nobleman to accompany them to the village at the commencement of the forest. A couple of the *gendarmes'* horses were attached to the chaise; and towards the village did the procession repair. It will be seen that Dame Roquette was still suffered to continue at large, although Octavian communicated to the officers all that he knew concerning her complicity with the organized gang. The reason that she was not at once arrested will presently transpire.

On the village being reached, immense was the sensation produced amongst its inhabitants by the tidings of the hideous tragedy in the forest, and by the spectacle of the corpses as they were borne forth from the chaise. Lord Octavian and the officer of the mounted police lost no time in holding a conference with the Mayor: but this was of the most private character, and nothing of its nature

transpired. Immediately it broke up Lord Octavian resumed his journey in another equipage, he having received a loan from the Mayor to meet his immediate pecuniary requirements.

It was a little past ten o'clock in the morning when the young English nobleman thus pursued his journey,—now unattended, and having to deplore the loss of a valet who had served him faithfully. The forest was traversed—the fatal spot where the hideous tragedy had taken place, was passed; and when once the maze of countless trees was left behind, the road lay through an open country over which the eye could range to a considerable distance on either side. Upwards of thirty miles were so accomplished; and it was between one and two o'clock in the afternoon when the post-chaise entered a town where Octavian purposed to tarry a brief space that he might procure the refreshment of which he stood so much in need; for he had not as yet broken his fast.

The equipage drove up to the door of the principal hotel in the place; and on alighting, Lord Octavian observed two handsome travelling carriages which had evidently only arrived a few minutes previous, as the post-horses which were now to be changed, had not as yet moved away from the vicinage of the hotel. A couple of domestics in handsome liveries were conversing with a third menial in plain clothes, and who was evidently a valet in the same service as the footmen themselves. Octavian therefore concluded that some family of distinction had halted at this same hotel where his own equipage had stopped: but his mind was too much engrossed with a variety of subjects to have scope for any curiosity on that particular point. Inquiring for a private room, his demand was attended to by a waiter of the establishment,—who requested him to ascend to the first floor. Octavian followed the domestic up the staircase; and at the moment they reached the landing, the door of an apartment suddenly opened and a lady came forth. Ejaculations burst from the lips of this lady, as well as from those of Octavian: for it was the wife who was thus unexpectedly met by the husband at that place.

Zoe's first impulse was to spring forward and throw herself into Octavian's arms: but all in a moment a sickening sensation came over her as she remembered that he loved another! She staggered against the door-post, and would have fallen, were it not that Lord Octavian himself rushed towards her and caught her in his arms.

"Zoe—my dearest wife!" he murmured, as he strained her to his breast. "I was coming to seek you—I was on my way to join you, to do my duty by you henceforth! But by what lucky chance is it that I meet you here?"

"Octavian, is it possible," said Zoe, in accents tremulous with mingled joy and wonderment, "that I have heard aright—or do my ears deceive me?"

"It is true, Zoe," responded Meredith: "but, Oh! I have so much to tell you!"—then suddenly recollecting that the hotel-servant was a spectator of this scene, he turned to him, saying, "Conduct us to the private room that I have asked for."

The waiter at once obeyed: Zoe and Octavian were now alone together.

"Can you forgive me, Zoe?" asked her husband, seating himself by her side, taking her hand, and gazing upon her with looks of earnest entreaty: "is it possible that you can forgive me—that you can receive me again as I wish to be received?—for I am aware, Zoe, that you know everything ——Alas, I have long been convinced of it!"

For some minutes the amiable young lady was so overpowered by her feelings that she could give no response: the tears trickled down her cheeks—but through them she gazed with the most earnest and devoted affection upon her husband. Again and again did he press her to his heart: but his own voice was now stifled by the emotions which agitated within him.

"Zoe," he at length said, sinking at her feet, "on my knees do I implore your pardon for the past! I have indulged in a dream—I was its victim—it was a delusion——yet while it lasted it had the power to render me faithless in thought and in feeling unto yourself. Oh! bitterly, bitterly do I repent everything that has occurred! I have been very, very wicked—I have requited all your love in a manner which I blush to look back upon! But forgive me, Zoe—forgive me!—and henceforth shall it be my constant and unwearied study to make every atonement!"

"Octavian," answered Zoe, in a voice which flowed as softly as the tears themselves that were trickling from her eyes, "I never had expected to hear such language as this from your lips! And, Oh! if it be sincerely spoken—if it do indeed faithfully represent any change which may have taken place in your own heart, you are at this moment rendering me the happiest of women!"

"As God is my judge," exclaimed Meredith, starting up from his knees, "I am proclaiming from the lips all that is truly felt in the heart!"

Again they embraced; and words have no power to describe the joy, the paradise of feeling which Zoe now experienced. Indeed, it was a happiness almost too much for her to endure; and this sudden change in her circumstances was naturally accompanied by a proportionate revulsion in all the feelings of the heart itself. Without as yet being acquainted with a single particular of the incidents which had brought this change about and recalled her husband to her arms, she accepted the assurances which Octavian had given her: she felt convinced they were sincere—his presence there was a proof of it—and she consequently abandoned herself to the full tide of that sunlit stream of joy on which her soul was now floating. A dizziness came over her, and she felt as if she were about to faint—as if indeed she must swoon off in the very ecstasy of happiness itself: but she exerted all her powers to save herself as it were from unconsciousness—and she succeeded.

"Oh, my beloved Octavian!" she murmured, as her head reposed upon his shoulder—and though her voice was low, yet was there a thrill of exultation in its tone, "what bliss has this day brought forth for me! And yesterday too——I ought to have looked upon it as the harbinger of some most happy change that was to take place——"

"Yesterday, my beloved Zoe?" said Octavian: "what mean you?"

"Until yesterday," rejoined the now happy wife, "methought that there were within me the seeds of an incurable disease: methought that consumption had fastened upon my vitals, and

that I had not long to remain in this world! Indeed, Octavian, for your sake I wished that death would come speedily—and I cared not *how* speedily! But yesterday the skill of a physician enabled him to ascertain that all my forebodings were erroneous."

"Heaven be thanked!" cried Meredith: and it was indeed with sincerity that he gave vent to this ejaculation. "Yes, heaven be thanked!—for, Oh, my beloved Zoe! it is happiness to know that you will live long in order that the atonement of your contrite husband may be all the more complete. Ah! think you that I have not comprehended all the sacrifices which you in your sublime magnanimity were making on my behalf? Yes—I have been a wretch towards you——"

"Speak not thus, my dearest, dearest husband," interrupted Lady Octavian: "there was nothing that I would not have done to ensure your happiness!—there was no sacrifice of my own feeling that I would not have made in order to save you from being unhappy! But tell me, Octavian——"

"Yes, I will tell you everything," exclaimed the young nobleman. "Yet in so doing I must mention a name——"

"I know it," said his wife firmly,—"the name of Christina Ashton. But heaven forbid, Octavian, that you should have to tell me aught which may henceforth prevent me from regarding her as my friend——"

"Zoe," responded the young nobleman, "if she were not virtuous I should not dare to look you in the face——I should not be worthy of this pardon which you have bestowed upon me! Christina loves another——"

"She loves another?" cried Zoe, with a thrill of joy in her soul. "Is it possible that I have all along been mistaken as to the nature of her feelings towards you——"

"Suffice it to say, Zoe," interrupted Meredith, "she loves another! Of this I have received the most incontestable proof. It aroused me from my delusion—it awoke me with a sudden start from my dream——I beheld all the enormity of my conduct towards yourself—I set off to join you in France—I lost not an instant—I was resolved to throw myself at your feet and implore your pardon for the past! For, Oh! I knew that you loved me, Zoe—and I despaired not of obtaining that pardon!"

"Oh, it is granted—it is granted!" exclaimed the happy wife: "and henceforth, Octavian, you need never entertain a remorseful thought nor cherish a mournful memory on account of the incidents which are gone by!"

"Admirable Zoe!" exclaimed Meredith; "how could I ever have been vile and base enough to do violence to a heart so loving and tender as your's? But I repeat, the remainder of my life shall be devoted to the duty of insuring your happiness;—and, Oh! that duty will be a pleasant one! But tell me, Zoe—how is it that you are here? Has the bridal already taken place? and are you accompanying the bridal party?"

"Yes—it is so," responded Zoe: and then, with a look of surprise, she asked, "But how did you learn that the marriage was fixed for to-day?—because you must have left London before my last letter, which was only written a few days ago, could possibly have reached you."

"True, Zoe," answered Octavian: "but it was from another source that I accidentally heard of the bridal that was fixed for to-day. And now that I find you here, and recollect having seen the travelling-carriages in front of the hotel——"

"Your conjectures are right," said Lady Octavian; "I am accompanying the bridal party. This morning my beloved friend Clarine has become the bride of Viscount Delorme."

"And who accompanies the happy pair in addition to yourself?" asked Meredith.

"The first carriage is occupied by that happy pair and myself," responded Zoe. "The other carriage is for the accommodation of the notary who drew up the marriage-contracts according to the French form, and who with his wife came all the way from Fontainebleau to be present at the ceremony; for they have known the Viscount Delorme for some years and are much attached to him. And in that same second carriage a friend of Alfred Delorme's travels with the notary and his wife. He is the Baron de Margaux: he was invited to attend the bridal—and he came, though he arrived late. The bridesmaids were the daughters of a gentleman dwelling in the neighbourhood of the old Chateau; and it was the worthy priest of the village who procured their assistance on the occasion. They of course returned to their home after the ceremony. As for M. Volney, the bride's father,—he remains at the Chateau for the present——But you seem to be musing, my dear husband?"

"I was thinking how my presence might interfere with the arrangements you had previously made. From your letters I have been enabled to judge how great is the friendship which has sprung up between the Viscountess Delorme and yourself: you have doubtless promised to remain with her for the present—she will be disappointed if you be separated from her——"

"And why should I be separated?" asked Zoe. "Oh, *you*, my dear Octavian, will be truly welcome amongst this bridal party; and you know not how rejoiced will the amiable Clarine prove at our reunion. You will not be angry with me, Octavian, if I confess that I made her my confidante——"

"I can be angry with you for nothing! But think you that I dare intrude myself——"

"It will be no intrusion," exclaimed Zoe; "and well convinced am I that the Viscount Delorme will most cheerfully invite you to be of the party and offer you a seat in one of the carriages. Come at once!—for our halt was not to be long here——we were told that it might be half-an-hour, in consequence of some little delay with regard to the post-horses——"

"One word more, Zoe!" said Octavian. "A terrible crime was perpetrated last night—a crime of which I was nearly being rendered the victim——"

"Good heavens, is it possible?"—and Zoe clung to her husband as if she feared that it was possible for him even now to be snatched from her.

He related the particulars of the tragedy in all their details; and his wife listened with shuddering horror. For some minutes more they remained alone together in that room, in deep and earnest conversation; and then they repaired to the apartment where the bridal pair and their friends were gathered.

Lord Octavian Meredith was now presented to the Viscount and Viscountess Delorme; and from both did he receive a cordial welcome. The Viscount then proceeded to introduce him to the other persons present; and Clarine availed herself of this opportunity to draw Zoe aside and to offer her felicitations that her husband was restored to her.

Meanwhile the other introductions to which we have just alluded took place. First of all Octavian was presented to the notary and his wife, who were a middle-aged couple, of very excellent dispositions and very pleasing manners.

"And now, my lord," said the Viscount Delorme, thus addressing Octavian, "permit me to present you to my friend the Baron De Margaux—a gentleman whom I have for some time known, and from whom I have on various occasions received great kindnesses."

The introduction was effected; and we may here observe that the Baron De Margaux was about forty years of age—of tall figure—and if not exactly handsome, at least very prepossessing in his looks. He was elegantly dressed: he had dark hair; and a glossy moustache gave him a certain military appearance. He was considered to be exceedingly fascinating in his manners,—one of those men who have the power of rendering themselves agreeable without any visible effort, or without any study after effect. He immediately began conversing in an affable strain with Lord Octavian Meredith, until the Viscount Delorme's valet entered to announce that the equipages were now in readiness.

The Viscount at once gave Lord Octavian a pressing invitation to accompany the party to Fontainebleau and make his mansion a home so long as he might find it agreeable. The offer was accompanied by the intimation that a seat in one of the carriages was also at Octavian's service; and the young nobleman accepted all these proposals with grateful acknowledgments.

"I must however observe," said Meredith, "that I join your party under circumstances alike peculiar and painful. I have neither valet in attendance upon me, nor a change of garments; and the very money which I now have in my purse is a loan which I procured. Last night a horrible crime was perpetrated in a forest some thirty miles distant: murder's dreadful work was done—my faithful domestic and the two postilions of the vehicle in which I journeyed, fell by the hands of brigands!"

Ejaculations of horror burst from several lips as this intelligence was imparted by Lord Octavian.

"I myself was stricken down senseless," continued the young nobleman; "and I was indebted to a poor old peasant-woman living in the forest for an asylum for the night. At an early hour this morning I bent my way to the village that was nearest to the scene of the tragedy; and on representing my position to a person in that place, I procured the money for a draft upon my London banker."

"And is there no clue to the miscreants who perpetrated this crime?" asked Alfred Delorme, his countenance expressing mingled horror and indignation.

"You may conjecture," responded Octavian, "how little was the trace which the villains left behind them, when they assassinated my valet and the two postilions, and left me for dead upon the spot."

"And that is the very forest," observed the Viscount Delorme, "which we shall have to traverse presently."

"It will be in the broad daylight," observed Lord Octavian: "and consequently there is nothing to fear. Besides, our party is too numerous ——and moreover the villains would scarcely venture upon an attempt at another crime so close on the heels of the former. I did not mention those dreadful circumstances with the idea of making you alter your previously arranged plans——"

"A portion of these plans," interjected the Viscount Delorme, "was to the effect that we should halt for the night at a town about ten miles beyond the forest."

"And by all means keep to your arrangements," said Lord Octavian. "It were downright pusillanimity on my part to counsel you otherwise; and it were unnecessary for you to think of a change in your projects."

"Most unquestionably," said the Baron De Margaux; "for if I understood you aright, my dear friend, the people of the hotel at the town where you have all along purposed to stop, have received their instructions to prepare for the reception of this large party which we now form."

Finally, after a little more discussion, it was agreed that the journey should be continued, and the plan should remain precisely the same as if Lord Octavian Meredith's fearful intelligence had not been communicated at all.

CHAPTER CXXXI.

THE BARON DE MARGAUX.

It was three o'clock when the equipages started in continuation of the journey. The first carriage contained the Viscount and Viscountess Delorme, Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith: the second contained the Baron De Margaux, the notary and his wife. The three male domestics and three lady's-maids (two belonging to Zoe, and one to the Viscountess) were distributed on the dickies of the two vehicles. We should observe, in order to avoid leaving anything unaccounted for, that immediately after the Viscount Delorme had received the assent of M. Volney to his marriage with Clarine, he had sent for these equipages from Fontainebleau to that village which was in the neighbourhood of the old Chateau.

It was about six o'clock when the carriages halted at a village at the extremity of the forest in which the dreadful tragedy of the previous night had been enacted. On driving up to the post-house, the travellers were informed that they must wait about half-an-hour for horses, there having been an unusual number of equipages passing along that road for the last day or two; and as the whole posting arrangements are a monopoly in the hands of the French Government, it is forbidden for any private enterprise to interfere therewith: so that it is by no means a rare occurrence for travellers to be thus temporarily in-

convenienced, as was the case with those of whom we are now writing.

The consequence of the delay was that the party had to proceed to the village inn, which was totally distinct from the post-house. As a matter of course some refreshments were ordered: but the Viscount Delorme expressed his annoyance at the delay, as he naturally wished to get to the end of the day's journey for the sake of the ladies, who he was afraid would be frightened to pass through the forest as evening approached, after the dreadful tale told by Lord Octavian Meredith.

"I will go and see how long these horses are likely to be," said the Baron De Margaux.

"And I also will endeavour to urge them on at the post-house," said Lord Octavian Meredith.

"I beg," observed the Baron, "that your lordship will not give yourself the trouble: the remonstrance of one will be sufficient."

"On the contrary," exclaimed Meredith, "if they see that we are impatient they may perhaps hasten their arrangements to serve us; for these delays are truly scandalous, when we consider that the laws do not admit the alternative of obtaining relays elsewhere."

"And yet methinks," urged the Baron, "that if I were to act alone in the matter, I might with more effect use that persuasiveness which is of a golden character:"—and he smiled significantly as he tapped the pocket which might be supposed to contain the purse.

"By all means do as you think fit," said Octavian, with a courteous bow, which was as much as to imply that he renounced his intention of accompanying the Baron.

"Yes—I think," said the notary, "that the Baron can manage the matter very well by himself—the more especially as you, my lord, are a foreigner, to whom the postmaster might not be inclined to show any extraordinary attention."

"Rest assured that I will do my best," said the Baron De Margaux: and he issued from the room.

Immediately after the door had closed behind him, Octavian said to Zoe, in a hurried whisper, "Engage them in conversation for a few minutes, so that they may not think my absence strange, nor immediately remark it."

Lady Octavian did as she was desired; and her husband stole forth from the apartment.

"Your friend the Baron," said Zoe to the Viscount Delorme, "appears to be even more impatient of this delay than you yourself are. He trusts to his powers of persuasion to abridge it as much as possible——"

"Yes, he is a man who is not to be imposed upon by these public functionaries," answered the Viscount.

"You have known the Baron a long time?" said Zoe inquiringly.

"I first met him in Madrid about three years ago," answered the Viscount. "He was then engaged to be married to a young lady of great wealth and beauty, the daughter of an old Hidalgo. I know not how it happened—but the match was suddenly broken off: a great mystery pervaded the circumstance—and the Baron himself observed the strictest silence upon the point. It was however supposed by his friends that he had discovered something prejudicial to the lady's character, and that he himself was the author of the rupture. While at Madrid, he rendered me an essential service: for one night, when returning late from a party at the residence of some French friends in that city, I was attacked by three or four ruffians, who struck me down senseless. When I returned to consciousness, the Baron was bending over me: he had saved my life from those miscreants: but unfortunately he had not come up in time to prevent them from making off with my pocket-book, which was full of bank-notes. It appears they were about to despatch me at the instant the Baron so fortunately made his appearance."

"That is a service," said the notary, "which you can never forget."

"Assuredly not," answered the Viscount Delorme. "We afterwards met in Barcelona: for I have travelled much in Spain, and have visited all the principal cities and towns. I resided for some months in the Catalonian capital; and the Baron was there during the whole time. We dwelt at the same hotel—and we were both alike sufferers from a piece of villany that was perpetrated in the establishment."

"And what was that?" asked the notary.

"There was some grand ecclesiastical procession one day," continued the Viscount, "which absorbed universal attention. The hotel where we resided was deserted by its inmates, who were anxious to behold the ceremony. When I returned, I found that my trunks had been rifled of all their valuables; and a considerable number of bank-notes had been taken from one of them. But my loss was comparatively trivial when I came to learn that of the Baron De Margaux. His trunks had likewise been pillaged, and he lost a sum three or four times greater than that of which I was plundered. Two or three other guests in the same establishment were similarly served; and it was therefore evident that the thieves had made the best of their time during the procession."

"And were they never detected?" asked the notary's wife.

"Never," replied the Viscount. "On several subsequent occasions I have met the Baron De Margaux; but there is one to which I must especially direct your attention, as we are conversing on the subject. The scene was at Naples; and one day I was invited by a foreign friend whom I met in that city, to accompany him to the rehearsals at the grand theatre La Scala. Thither we accordingly repaired; and there I again met my friend the Baron De Margaux. Having listened to the singing, we remained to witness the ballet; and as it was a new one, the director of the theatre had according to custom ordered the dancers to appear in precisely the same costume which they were to wear in the evening at the public performance. Amongst these dancers was one of great eminence: she came in her carriage—she was attended by a couple of lady's-maids; and whether it were out of vanity, or whether it were for the purpose of consulting the ballet-master as to the effects which would be produced by bedizening herself with gems, I know not: all I can say is that this celebrated *danseuse* brought with her on the occasion a casket of the most magnificent diamonds. She did not however put them on for the rehearsal; and they were left in her dressing-room in the care of her principal lady's-maid.

This *danseuse* and two others were in the midst of an elegant *pas de trois*, when all of a sudden there was a cry of 'Fire!' from the back part of the stage. Only imagine the confusion and terror which immediately ensued amongst the whole company of singers and dancers assembled for the occasion, as well as amongst the other theatrical officials and the number of spectators whom the courtesy of the director had admitted! It was but too true that through the negligence of a carpenter or a scene-shifter the place was on fire. I remember that some of the young females were so paralysed by consternation as to be utterly unable to help themselves:—their brains appeared to be turned! All the gentlemen present rendered their services with promptitude and presence of mind: but it was to the daring conduct of the Baron De Margaux that the flames were extinguished and the whole theatre was saved from conflagration. The event had however an unfortunate sequence; for the diamonds of the celebrated *danseuse* to whom I have been alluding, were nowhere to be found when order was again restored. The *danseuse* was a prey to the most distracting grief; and she levelled the bitterest reproaches against her tire-women. There was however much excuse for those poor creatures; for it was in the immediate vicinage of the dressing-rooms that the fire had caught; and therefore the instant the alarm was given, they had rushed forth in wildest terror, thinking only of saving their lives and utterly regardless of the casket of jewels."

"And were they never discovered?" asked the notary's wife.

"I am convinced they were not!" murmured Zoe, thus involuntarily giving an audible expression to the idea which was passing in her mind.

The words were not however precisely caught by any one present; and the Viscountess Delorme inquired, "What were you saying, my dear friend?"

"Nothing," responded Lady Octavian Meredith. "I meant nothing particular:"—but she had an abstracted air as she thus spoke.

"I cannot precisely say," continued the Viscount Delorme, "that the real author of the robbery was not discovered; though I may positively affirm that the jewels themselves were not. One of the scene-shifters was proved to have rushed out of the theatre in a very suspicious manner the moment the cry of fire was raised: he was arrested—and though I have forgotten the particulars, yet I know that the circumstantial evidence was deemed sufficiently strong against him to induce the criminal tribunal to declare him guilty; and he was sentenced to some very severe punishment."

"And the poor *danseuse* lost her diamonds?" said the notary, in a tone of sympathy.

"Yes: and they were of exceeding value," rejoined the Viscount Delorme. "But, speaking of the Baron De Margaux, it is my duty as well as my pleasure to observe that whenever we have met he has invariably demonstrated the utmost friendship towards me. A few days ago I accidentally encountered him in the neighbourhood of the old Chateau: he was passing through the village at the time—and he halted there for refreshments while the two horses were being changed. Glad to meet so excellent a friend, who had saved my life at Madrid, I asked him to be present at that happy ceremony of this morning which gave me the hand of my beloved Clarine."

"And every friend of your's, dearest Alfred," whispered the young lady, "shall ever be esteemed as a friend by me. The moment you first informed me how deeply you were indebted to the Baron De Margaux, I was rejoiced to learn that he was to be present at the ceremony of this day."

Leaving the conversation to progress in this manner at the hotel, we must follow Lord Octavian Meredith, who had issued from the room almost immediately after the Baron De Margaux quitted it. Hastily descending the stairs, the young nobleman found one of the Viscount Delorme's footmen lounging at the front door; and he inquired which direction the Baron had taken. The footman replied that the Baron had sped through the village in the direction of the post-house. Thither Octavian therefore proceeded; and on coming within sight of the post-house, he observed the Baron talking to the postmaster himself. Standing aside in the shade of some trees, so as to avoid being seen, Octavian kept his eyes upon the Baron, and presently observed him saunter away from the spot where he had just been standing. Instead of returning into the village, he passed out of it; and when at a distance of about two hundred yards from the posting-house, he stopped and looked around.

Meredith still managed to keep out of sight, though retaining the Baron constantly in view. The Baron went on a little farther—probably to the distance of about another hundred yards; and then he whistled. The road on both sides was bordered by trees; for the village was on the outskirt of the forest. Meredith concealed himself amongst the trees on one side of the road; and in a few minutes he beheld an individual issue from amongst the trees on the other side and join the Baron. Peeping cautiously along, Octavian got near enough to listen to their conversation—a proceeding which the thick fringe of hedge bordering the road in that particular spot, allowed him thus to accomplish. It is not now necessary to explain why he thus listened, or what he overheard, as these details will presently transpire in their proper place. Suffice it for the present to say that the conversation was not very long, and that so soon as it was over the Baron speeding away, re-entered the village.

The man with whom he had been discoursing, walked on a little distance in a contrary direction, and therefore away from the village: but all of a sudden, at the point where the hedge ceased, he plunged in amongst the trees on the same side as that where Meredith had remained concealed. Of all these movements Octavian was aware; and gliding amongst the trees, he in a few minutes confronted the individual to whom we are alluding. He was a short, stout man, attired in a peasant garb: there was nothing sinister in his appearance:—on the contrary, he might be taken for a quiet and inoffensive rustic. He started on thus suddenly meeting with some one in that maze of shade: but almost at the same instant Octavian sprang at him and hurled him to the ground. The fellow struggled desperately, and even succeeded in getting a clasp-knife from his pocket. But

before he had time to open it, Meredith had wrested it from his clutch, and had hurled it to a distance. Almost immediately afterwards the sounds of footsteps were heard approaching: the ruffian made one last and desperate effort to free himself; and he would possibly have succeeded were it not that two of the forest police rushed up to the spot.

The fellow was taken prisoner; and Meredith hastily made certain communications to the police-officers. He then left them to bear away their captive, while he retraced his steps to the inn. While proceeding thither he adjusted his garments which had been disordered by the struggle; and with his kerchief he wiped off, as well as he was able, the dirt-stains which his clothes had caught during the conflict.

On reaching the inn, the young nobleman ascended to the apartment where he had left the bridal pair, Zoe, the notary and his wife—and where he now likewise found the Baron. This individual immediately accosted him, and said, "So your lordship thought it worth while, after all, to go and use your influence with the postmaster——At least I presume that this has been the object for which you have issued forth?"

"I have not spoken to the postmaster," replied Lord Octavian. "But may I ask you what satisfaction you have obtained from him?"

"The horses will be in readiness almost directly," answered the Baron, for a moment eyeing Meredith in a peculiar manner—and then immediately caressing his moustache with a sort of careless indifference.

"What is the matter with you, my dear Zoe?" asked Clarine, now advancing towards her friend, drawing her aside, and thus speaking to her in a whisper. "You look pale, troubled, and excited. You appear as if you were endeavouring to conceal something that is vexing you? I had hoped that with your husband restored to you—and after the assurances which you have found an opportunity of giving me, to the effect that you are now completely happy——"

"Dearest Clarine," interrupted Zoe, also speaking in a whisper, "It is not for this that I am troubled. On the contrary, I have every reason to be happy! But I see that the moment is come when, according to a hint which I have received from Lord Octavian, I am to prepare you for something. Start not, my dear Clarine—"

"Good heavens, what mean you?" ejaculated the Viscountess; and as she was thrown off her guard, or rather, we should say, alarmed by Lady Octavian's words, she spoke more loudly than she had intended.

The Viscount Delorme immediately turned towards her; and he at once perceived that terror was depicted on his bride's countenance, as well as a painful anxiety on the features of Zoe.

"Has anything occurred?" asked the Viscount, with a tone and look that were full of a tender concern. "Ah! I comprehend it! You both tremble at the idea of passing through that forest——"

"And natural enough," interrupted Lord Octavian. "Do you not think, Baron, it is natural enough that these ladies should be affrighted at the idea of venturing amidst the mazes of that forest which is now rendered so hideously memorable by the tragedy of last night."

"Indeed, my lord," answered the Baron, darting a quick but scarcely perceptible glance at Octavian's countenance, "I do not see any reason for this alarm: and methought that you yourself just now, when you first joined our party——"

"All things considered," chimed in the notary, "it would be advisable to procure an escort. We all know—and therefore it is no secret, unless, indeed, Lord Octavian Meredith be the only one ignorant of the fact—that M. Volney insisted upon giving his beloved daughter a munificent dower, all of which is in bank-notes and specie——"

"You speak as if every one knew it," interrupted the notary's wife. "Why, my dear, here is the Baron de Margaux who may perhaps be ignorant of the fact, inasmuch as he only reached the Chateau at an early hour this morning, and the marriage settlements were signed last evening."

"My friend the Baron is not ignorant upon the point," said the Viscount Delorme; "for having no secrets from one with whom I have been so intimate, and to whom I am indebted for my very life, I failed not to mention M. Volney's intended munificence when I met the Baron some few days back in the village, and when I pressed him to be of the bridal party to-day."

"Well, really," said the notary, with impatience, "it matters not amongst us all here who knows or who does not know the fact to which I refer. It is sufficient that there is this large sum in the first carriage to render it expedient that we should have an escort. The half-hour that we were to tarry here, has already grown into an hour—the shades of evening are coming on——"

The notary's speech was suddenly interrupted by an incident which produced a startling effect. The Baron de Margaux was about to issue from the room,—when Lord Octavian Meredith bounded towards him; and clutching him forcibly by the arm, exclaimed, "No!—you cannot be permitted to depart hence!"

For an instant the countenance of the Baron displayed a ghastly expression; and he staggered as if smitten a violent blow with an invisible hand: but the next instant the blood rushed to his face; and assuming the haughtiest demeanour, he said, "My lord, this conduct so unwarrantable—so outrageous——"

"We shall see whether I am not justified in what I am doing!" said Octavian, in whom a remarkable change had taken place: for while he retained his hold upon the Baron, his looks expressed loathing and horror, mingled with the sternest resolve.

"My lord, what means this?" asked the Viscount Delorme, stepping forward.

"Clarine, my dearest friend," Zoe hastily whispered to the Viscountess, "prepare yourself for a horrible revelation——"

"Unhand me, my lord!" thundered forth the Baron De Margaux, with a perfect ferocity in his look, as he thus addressed himself to Lord Octavian.

But scarcely were the words spoken, when hasty and heavy footsteps were heard rushing up the staircase—the door was flung open—three or four police-officers burst into the room—and the Baron De Margaux was seized upon as their prisoner.

"Away with him from our sight!" exclaimed Lord Octavian Meredith: "away with that foul murderer!"

"Murderer!" echoed the Viscount Delorme. "Impossible! What madness is this?—what terrible mistake has been committed? Stop!"—and the young nobleman, violently excited, rushed forward to detain the *gendarmes* as they were moving away with their prisoner.

"Viscount!" exclaimed Meredith, "your generous confidence has been villanously betrayed. You know not the plot from which you have escaped. Look at that miscreant!—his whole demeanour bears evidence to his guilt! Away with him!"

The police-officers hurried the false Baron—now utterly discomfited, and quivering with terror—from the apartment: but the utmost excitement prevailed amongst those who were left behind in that room.

Clarine had sunk down with a subdued shriek of horror upon the sofa, when the lips of Octavian proclaimed De Margaux to be a murderer: but Zoe was at hand to sustain and minister to her friend. The notary's wife, with a groan expressive of the fearful sensation produced upon herself, clung to her husband; and he stared in horrified consternation upon the false Baron as he was being hurried out of the apartment. Octavian caught the Viscount Delorme by the arm, and hurriedly gave him a few words of explanation, to which that young nobleman listened with feelings that can be better imagined than described. Immense was the sensation which prevailed throughout the inn, and which speedily spread through the village, when it was known that the leader of the gang which had perpetrated the diabolic crime of the preceding evening had been discovered and taken into custody.

When some degree of calmness was restored in the room where the arrest was accomplished, Lord Octavian Meredith proceeded to give certain explanations. He stated how his suspicions had been excited at Dame Roquette's hut, and how he was on the point of making an endeavour to steal forth thence when his purpose was frustrated by the arrival of the band in the vicinage of the little dwelling. He then went on to explain how the chief of the gang, having dismissed the rest, entered the hut, and passing the light before his eyes, had been beguiled into the belief that he was asleep.

"But instead of sleeping," continued Lord Octavian, "I listened to the discourse which ensued between the chief of the gang and Dame Roquette. I could not succeed in overhearing all that was said: but in the first instance I was surprised to find that the leader of that gang of miscreants was speaking in language the most grammatically accurate, and in a tone which appeared to denote the polished gentleman, instead of the low brutal ruffian. Having made some comments upon the awful work which had just been accomplished, the leader went on to explain to Dame Roquette the business which he had in hand for the morrow—namely, for this day. There was talk of an ambush to be laid and the mustering of the gang at some given point in the forest, in order that a grand blow might be struck boldly and successfully: for the chief expressed his conviction that there would be more than one equipage, and therefore many people to deal with. Then for some minutes he spoke in a lower tone so that I could not catch what he said: but presently, to my surprise and consternation, I heard him mention the names of M. Volney and his daughter. Ah! you may suppose that I was indeed startled on hearing those names: for I knew them to be those of the kind friends beneath whose roof my own wife was sojourning."

"The miscreant!" exclaimed the Viscount Delorme. "And to think that I should have for some years considered that man to be amongst my best friends! But proceed, my lord:—we are impatient for your explanations."

"After that low whispering," continued Octavian, "the leader of the murderous gang went on speaking to Dame Roquette in a somewhat more audible tone; and then *your* name, Viscount, was mentioned. I gathered that you were the accepted suitor of M. Volney's daughter—that the bridal was to take place to-day—that after the ceremony you were to set out on your way towards Fontainebleau—and that you would pass through this forest. I likewise learnt that by some means or another the miscreant chief had ascertained that you would most probably have a very large sum of money in your possession, and that the wedding-presents of the bride were to be of a most costly description. Then the leader's voice again grew indistinct; and all I could succeed in ascertaining of this portion of his discourse, was that he himself would be upon the road—but whether in your company or not, I could not rightly understand. He however gave Dame Roquette instructions relative to the part which she would have to perform. One of his gang—a man bearing the name of Moulin—was to be likewise upon the road, and even I believe to penetrate into the neighbourhood of the Chateau itself—at all events to find an opportunity to hold communication with his chief and receive the orders which circumstances might render necessary. It is evident that the villanous leader was at that time only partially acquainted with your plans; and he knew not precisely when you would pass through the forest. For precaution's sake he did not desire his gang to muster too soon; and therefore the object of this Moulin's meeting him along the line of route, was to receive the instructions as to the hour of assemblage. It was then to be Dame Roquette's duty to carry round the final order to the separate abodes of the individuals of the band; and thus, you perceive, no precaution was omitted by the fiendlike author of the plot in order to ensure its fullest success. But I must observe that throughout this discourse which took place between himself and Dame Roquette, I did not once hear her address him by any name; nor was there a cranny in the door through which I might peep to obtain a glimpse of his countenance. Twice did he come into the little room which had been allotted to me: twice did he pass the lantern before my eyes to assure himself that I slept: but on neither occasion dared I raise my eyelids even so much as a hair's breadth, for fear the miscreant should perceive that I really slept not; and as I knew that he was armed to the teeth, while I was altogether weaponless, I was completely at his merey. Thus you will understand that the chief went forth from the cottage without my having succeeded in obtaining the slightest idea of his personal appearance."

"It was a night of horror which you passed!"

exclaimed the Viscount Delorme: and the words were echoed by the other listeners—while Zoe shuddered visibly at the bare thought of the terrific dangers which her beloved husband had gone through.

"In the morning," continued Octavian, "I took leave of the old woman without suffering her to suspect that I had overheard a single syllable of the previous night's discourse between herself and the chief of the gang. On gaining the road leading through the forest, I encountered a body of the police: I communicated to them all that had taken place; and they were at once struck with the expediency of acting with the utmost caution in order to effect the capture of the chief and of his whole gang. But inasmuch as I was utterly unable to name a single member of that gang, and the suspicions of the police were totally at fault on the subject, it was necessary to adopt a course which should lead to the accomplishment of a twofold aim: namely, that of discovering and identifying the chief himself, and that of suffering the gang to assemble at the point already known, but the hour of which assembling had yet to be ascertained. I accompanied the police-officials to the Mayor of the nearest village; and after a consultation, it was decided upon following the policy suggested by circumstances."

Octavian paused for a few moments, and then continued in the ensuing manner:—

"I set out in pursuance of my journey; and I expected to reach the Chateau before your party had left it. It however happened otherwise. On meeting my wife, I questioned her relative to the friends who belonged to the party. My suspicions could settle only upon one:—this was the Baron De Margaux; and yet I dared not rush precipitately to the conclusion that he was the criminal. I explained everything to my wife: but I enjoined her to say nothing of all those matters until she should perceive that the *denouement* was approaching. I was afraid that if premature revelations were made, you would not be enabled to control your feelings; and that these feelings being reflected in your looks, would show the Baron that he was suspected and would cause him to decamp—thereby frustrating the ends of justice. You may conceive how difficult it was for me to command my own feelings and exercise a perfect control over the expression of my own countenance, when I found myself in the presence of the Baron. I immediately saw that he was galvanized with terror on beholding me; and yet the miscreant was so much the master of his own feelings that even to me his startled emotion was barely perceptible—while to other lookers-on, unconscious of all that was beneath the surface, it would not have been perceptible at all. That he himself was instantaneously lulled into the belief that I suspected him not, is evident from the fact that he remained with us to prosecute his diabolic plans. The sound of his voice confirmed my suspicion that he *was* the leader of the gang—the wretch whom I had heard last night explaining his iniquitous projects to Dame Roquette. I determined to watch him narrowly; and you saw that when he proposed to issue forth from this tavern under the pretext of remonstrating with the postmaster, I offered to accompany him. And here I should observe that the delay in obtaining the horses was purposely arranged by the police—a hint being given to that effect to the postmaster, so that the whole ramifications of the plan might fully work themselves out. You saw that the false Baron did not wish me to accompany him; and fearful of exciting his suspicions prematurely, I allowed him to go forth alone. But I stole after him: I dogged him to a short distance from the village; and I succeeded in over-hearing some little conversation between himself and his man Moulin. Fortunate was it that circumstances flowed in this channel: for the false Baron ordered Moulin to speed at once into the forest and issue directions to the assembled gang that they were to make some alteration as to the scene of the contemplated attack, for it was now proposed to be effected at a spot further on than that originally intended, no doubt for the purpose of allowing the shades of evening to deepen as much as possible. The false Baron and his man separated: I intercepted the latter—I seized upon him and made him my prisoner. His errand to the forest was thus cut short. A couple of police-officials came up at the time; and I told them all that had occurred. One of them set off with all possible speed to acquaint the main body of the *gendarmerie* that the gang was assembled in the forest, and that the capture might now be effected: the other official, having disposed of his prisoner, fetched some of his comrades to effect the arrest of the false Baron himself. I should observe that from the conversation which took place between the chief and his man Moulin, I learnt that the latter had been all the way to the neighbourhood of the Chateau—that there he had received his chief's instructions——"

"Yes—when the perfidious wretch," exclaimed the Viscount Delorme, "had insidiously ascertained from my lips the settled plan of the day's proceedings."

"No doubt," observed Lord Octavian. "Then the fellow Moulin must have ridden back with all possible despatch to the forest to give Dame Roquette the final instructions; and this second interview between him and the chief was for the purpose of making assurance doubly sure and ascertaining satisfactorily that no part of the plan had been altered by circumstances, and that there was a complete understanding on either side as to all the details. I think that I have now explained everything to you, my friends; and if I suffered so many hours to elapse ere the villain was completely unmasked, it was for the best possible motives."

"Oh! under all circumstances you acted rightly," exclaimed the Viscount Delorme. "But an idea has struck me! This villain whom I had deemed an honourable man and my friend, was doubtless the author of crimes which I had all along attributed to others. May he not have been connected with the gang at Madrid who robbed me on the occasion when he pretended to be the saviour of my life?—may it not have been he who plundered myself and others at the hotel at Barcelona?—may it not likewise have been he who robbed the *danseuse* of her jewels at Naples?—and instead of his contemplated marriage with the daughter of the Spanish Hidalgo being broken off in consequence of some flaw in the lady's character, may it not have been that her father received some whispered warning relative to the evil repute of the false Baron himself?"

"All these facts now speak for themselves," said Lord Octavian, "after the knowledge we have procured of the miscreant's true character. But let us pursue the journey: the town where you originally proposed to halt is but a few miles beyond the village where I first gave information to the municipal authority. It is no doubt at the town itself that the examination of the prisoners will take place."

The journey was resumed accordingly: the forest was traversed without interruption; and while the cavalcade was passing through it, the intelligence was communicated to the travellers that the whole of the band had been arrested by the *gendarmerie* and that Dame Roquette herself had been taken into custody: so that all Lord Octavian's measures were thus shown to have been well taken and his policy was carried out with effect.

CHAPTER CXXXII.

FINETTE.

MEREDITH'S idea was correct in respect to the place where the examination of the prisoners was to be conducted. The band consisted of about a dozen persons, most of whom were woodmen inhabiting the forest, and who during the daytime appeared to be engaged in the most peaceful pursuits. They had been organized by De Margaux himself: and under his leadership they had conducted all their proceedings with so much caution and prudence that the eye of suspicion had never once settled on any of these individuals. Oftentimes had they carried their depredations to a considerable distance,—their absence from their homes even for several days being unnoticed in a vast forest-district where every hut was isolated, and where the rural police seldom passed through the same quarter of the shady wilderness more than once or twice in the course of a week.

It may be asked by the reader what advantage the woodmen reaped by performing the parts of banditti when the necessities of their position compelled an outward show of poverty and forced them to a continual existence in those wretched hovels? And again it may be inquired what good Dame Roquette did herself by her connexion with the band? We may commence our explanations by stating that at the cottage of every criminal arrested on this occasion, considerable sums of money were found hidden in various places: supplies of wines and spirituous liquors were also dragged forth to light; and on the shelves of cupboards, luxuries appeared where only the most frugal fare might have been expected to meet the eye. Thus the members of the banditti had an interior luxury of their own, veiled by the dilapidated walls and wretched thatched roofs of their dwellings: they had the means of rioting in sensuous enjoyment—while the isolated position of each amidst the mazes of that forest, with no jealous neighbour's curious regards ever upon the watch, averted all suspicion. Then again, they accumulated treasure; and their wily chief had represented to them that when they had all enriched themselves they could one by one depart to other climes to enjoy their ill-gotten wealth for the remainder of their days. It would seem that the attack upon the bridal party was intended to be the last exploit of the kind: it was expected to reap a considerable harvest thereby; and several of the band had arranged for a precipitate departure from the forest on the following day. Their hopes were however frustrated and their iniquitous career was cut short, through the wisdom and presence of mind of Lord Octavian Meredith.

The bridal party reached in safety the town where preparations were made for its reception at the principal hotel; and on the following day Lord Octavian, Viscount Delorme, and the notary attended before the authorities to make their respective depositions in the criminal cases then pending. The false Baron De Margaux had recovered all his wonted hardihood when brought up into the presence of the examining magistrate,—though he studiously kept his eyes averted from that part of the crowded police-office which was allotted to the witnesses. There were two distinct cases to be entered into. One was the murder of the two postilions and Octavian's valet: the other was the meditated attack upon the bridal party. In respect to the former crime, Meredith was the only witness; and his evidence tended merely to criminate the false Baron and Dame Roquette, inasmuch as he could not possibly signalize amongst the band those individuals who had assisted in that stupendous enormity. The false Baron and the infamous old woman were accordingly ordered to be committed for trial on that capital charge. In respect to the other offence, the fact of the assemblage of the entire gang was sufficient to inculpate them all; while Meredith, Delorme, and the notary were enabled to give their several testimonies. It was Lord Octavian, however, whose evidence was most important,—that of Delorme and the notary merely tending to show under what circumstances the false Baron had joined their party at the old Chateau and subsequently travelled with it. The result was that the entire gang were committed for trial on the second charge; and that the whole posse of prisoners were sent off under a strong escort of *gendarmerie* to the prison of the principal assize town in the district.

It is our purpose to follow the false Baron De Margaux for the present. Arrived at the prison, he was separated from his companions; and being heavily ironed, was lodged in a cell by himself. The prison was situated on the outskirt of the town: a portion of it was the remnant of an old castle; and there was a deep moat on that side of the building. De Margaux's dungeon was in a round tower overlooking the moat, the stagnant water of which washed its foundations. A single window, with massive iron bars, afforded air and light; and the prisoner through his window could behold the open country stretching far away. There was a court-yard belonging to that portion of the prison to which the tower itself pertained; and there, at stated hours, the captives were permitted to take exercise. Two sentinels were furnished by the garrison of the town to keep watch upon the gaol day and night. One sentinel paced in front of the principal entrance; the other was stationed on the opposite side of the moat to which we have already alluded.

It was noon, on the second day after the committal of the prisoners; and De Margaux was walking alone in the court-yard: for it had been ordered that he should be prevented from holding any communication with the members of his band; and therefore at the time that he took exercise in the yard his subordinate accomplices were secured in their own cells. The authorities naturally inferred that the chief whose desperate character and intelligence had succeeded in organizing such a band, and so long eluding not merely the grasp but even the suspicion of justice, must be a person of no ordinary resources; and therefore that if he were allowed opportunities to communicate with his followers, he would most probably devise the means of escape.

De Margaux was therefore walking alone in the court-yard and at the time we have specified. A chain encircled his waist; and thereto were attached irons, which descending as far as his ancles, were there fettered by rings. His hands were free; and it will be understood that the nature of the fetters, however inconvenient to wear, did not prevent locomotion. The criminal had already well studied every detail of that portion of the prison in which he was confined; and while pacing to and fro in the court-yard, he was revolving in his thoughts various projects of escape. The windows of several other compartments of the prison looked upon two adjacent court-yards; and amongst those windows were the casements belonging to the apartments of one of the turnkeys. As De Margaux happened to be looking in that direction, he was struck by the appearance of a young woman, who from a jug was pouring water upon some flowers placed upon the sill. She was not above two-and-twenty—and if not actually handsome nor even pretty, was at least possessed of an interesting countenance. She had a fine pair of dark eyes; and as she smilingly nodded at her father who was engaged in the court-yard below—the one next to that where De Margaux was walking—her cherry lips revealed a very brilliant set of teeth. She was dressed with a certain coquettishness,—the invariable taste of a Frenchwoman having done its best to give effect to even the plainest apparel. De Margaux—whose keen intellect was ever ready to seize upon the slightest circumstance which by any possibility could be turned to his own advantage—raised his hat and made the most courteous bow to the turnkey's daughter.

Finette—for such was the damsel's name—had not before noticed the tall handsome gentlemanly captive; nor did she know for what crime he was imprisoned there. She was struck with his appearance and flattered by his courtesy: a blush rose to her cheeks as she returned the bow. Her father, happening to glance up at the moment, caught her thus nodding to some one; and he exclaimed, "Finette, whom are you noticing?"

This question was put loud enough to catch the ears of De Margaux in the next yard; and Finette, abashed, retired from the window. Her father—a stout, burly, as well as somewhat ill-looking man, and of rather a stern disposition—hastened up to the apartment, and angrily repeated the question. Finette was frightened, and gave no response. The turnkey glanced from the window; and perceiving De Margaux, at once comprehended that he must have been the object of his daughter's interest.

"Wretched girl!" he exclaimed, turning angrily—indeed almost ferociously round upon Finette; "do you know to whom you were bowing? That man, for all his gentlemanly looks, is one of the greatest miscreants that ever came within these walls. He is a murderer!"

"A murderer, father?" cried Finette. "It is impossible! A gentleman with such a distinguished air—such a mien——"

"I tell you, girl, that he is a murderer," interjected the turnkey. "If you had not been staying at your aunt's the day he and his comrades arrived, you would have seen the sensation their presence in the town created."

"But he is not yet tried, father?" said Finette inquiringly.

"No. But why do you ask the question?" exclaimed the turnkey.

"Because it may perhaps be proved that he is falsely charged, and is not so wicked after all. Do you not remember the Marquis who was accused of poisoning his wife, and whose case at first looked so black, but whose innocence was made manifest after all? And do you not recollect likewise the young gentleman that was charged with forgery—a mere boy of one-and-twenty? I told you that I could not believe him to be guilty: you declared that he was; and yet on the day of trial he was acquitted, and the real culprit took his place in the dock. So it may be with that gentleman," added Finette: "because——"

"Hold your tongue, girl," interrupted her father. "It is only because he is good-looking, well-dressed, and of fine manners, that you jump at the conclusion of his innocence. I wonder what the world will come to next! Handsome men can never be guilty in your estimation! If your mother were alive, she would have taught you differently; and it is a pity that I have not time to look more after you. If you go on in this way I shall send you altogether to your aunt in the country——"

"No, my dear father," said Finette, cajolingly, as she threw her arms round his neck, "you will not send me away, because who could attend to your housekeeping?"

"Ah! if it weren't for that," said the man, "it would be different. But no matter! I beg of you, Finette, not to notice prisoners from the window again: and this injunction is all the more necessary, because, as you know, I am going out for a half-holiday, and you will be here by yourself."

Thus ended the conversation between the father and daughter: but Finette's reflections on the same subject were not similarly concluded. She could not possibly persuade herself that the man of such distinguished appearance, of such imposing demeanour, with such dark hair, and so well cultivated a moustache, was a murderer. There was a great deal of romance—the foolish portion of romance, we mean—in the girl's disposition: every volume in the nearest circulating library had been greedily devoured by her; and in every well-dressed, handsome, prepossessing captive she invariably beheld a victim, a martyr, or a hero.

Her father went out for the remainder of the day; and Finette passed into the adjacent room—ostensibly to gossip with the wife of another turnkey, whose lodging it was—but in reality to glean all particulars relative to the charge for which the tall handsome prisoner was incarcerated. She learnt that he was the captain of a formidable gang of forest-banditti, and that all his followers were likewise in custody. The crimes of which they were accused were narrated to her; and though she shuddered while listening, yet she pertinaciously fell back on the belief that the innocence of De Margaux would transpire in respect to the blacker portion of the guilt alleged against him. As for his being the captain of a horde of banditti,—this was something chivalrously romantic and heroically grand in Finette's estimation. She returned to her own room: her father's injunctions were forgotten—or at least disregarded: she approached the window—she received another courteous salute from De Margaux—and she returned it. Be it understood that he had not overheard the conversation which had taken place between the father and daughter: but he felt assured that the girl must know for what he was imprisoned; and he therefore very naturally concluded that she either thought very lightly of the crimes imputed to him, or else disbelieved them—otherwise she would not thus receive and acknowledge his salutations. He made a sign that he wished to speak to her: then he placed his hand upon his heart—and next clasped both hands with an air of entreaty. Finette—deeply compassionating the brigand chief—nodded her head as much as to convey the intimation that she would do something on his behalf; and almost immediately afterwards the hour came at which De Margaux was to be reconsigned to his cell until the evening, when he would be allowed another short interval for exercise in the yard.

Thus was it that Mademoiselle Finette in a very brief space found herself involved in an adventure which appeared to her replete with a charming romance. For the next three or four hours she could settle herself to no occupation: she prepared no food for herself—her needlework remained untouched. The image of the brigand chief, with his fine tall form, his dark eyes, and his glossy moustache, was inseparable from her thoughts.

At six o'clock in the evening De Margaux was again released from his cell, and suffered to walk in the court-yard. Finette had comprehended from his signs that he wished to speak to her. Perhaps he had some message of importance to convey, and which he dared only trust to a friendly medium? perhaps the very proofs of his innocence depended thereon? Who could tell? It would be deplorable if such a life were to be sacrificed for the want of so simple a favour. Finette could not endure the thought; and she resolved to ascertain what De Margaux might have to say to her.

Having thus sophistically brought herself to the conclusion that there could be no possible harm in carrying out her intentions, she lost no time in executing them. All prisoners who were waiting for trial, were permitted to purchase such little luxuries as tobacco, snuff, bottled beer, wine, or spirits; and the turnkeys enjoyed a monopoly of the sale of these articles. Taking a bottle of wine in one hand and a packet of tobacco in the other, Finette descended from her room, and tripped across the court-yard with which that portion of the building communicated. The door opening into De Margaux's yard, was so situated in a corner as to be concealed by an angle of the edifice from the windows of the turnkey's rooms. In this door there was a little *guichet*, or trap, which served as a ready means of communication with any one on the opposite side, and to save the trouble of opening the door itself every time such communication was needful. It was at that *guichet*, too, that friends who came to visit prisoners stood to converse with them.

Opening the *guichet*, Finette looked through into the adjoining yard; and De Margaux instantaneously approached the door. There was no disappointment on either side by this closer view of each other: the false Baron was confirmed in his impression of Finette's pleasing looks—while she herself found the demeanour of the captive to be more distinguished and his manners more enchanting than even in her dreamy imaginings she had anticipated.

"You wished to speak to me?" she said, blushing with confusion, but glancing furtively at De Margaux's countenance from beneath the curtain of her long lashes.

"Yes, beauteous damsel," responded the prisoner; "because by your manner you displayed sympathy towards me."

"True! I felt sympathy," replied the still blushing Finette, "because—because—I could not possibly bring myself to believe——"

"That I am guilty?" ejaculated the false Baron, instantaneously penetrating what was passing in her mind. "No, no! I am not guilty! But to prove my innocence——"

"Thank heaven, you are not guilty!" said Finette: and then deeper grew her blushes at the sudden enthusiasm into which her feelings had thus betrayed her.

"You are pleased that I assure you of my innocence?" said De Margaux. "Amiable and beautiful girl! it is in such moments as these when the soul is sinking beneath the weight of an unjust accusation that the kind sympathy of one of your sex is so ineffably delicious. Ah! if I were free, how joyously would I testify my gratitude—Oh! how joyously—how sincerely!"

"But if you were free," asked Finette, "would you go back to your forest-life? Would you again become the captain of a band, which though gallant, is still lawless?"

"If I were free, sweet maiden," answered De Margaux—who was careful in his responses, and cautiously strove to elicit her sentiments, so that he might take his cue therefrom,—"if I were free, and if you were my companion, your word should be my law—your happiness should be my study—and therefore would I do naught that should in any way militate against your wishes."

"Perhaps—perhaps," faltered the hesitating and blushing Finette, "there is some one whom you long to rejoin—some heart that is beating in anxiety for you—some one whom you love and by whom you are beloved——"

"No," replied De Margaux; "I never until now knew what love is——but I experience its power at this moment! Not for worlds, sweet

maiden, would I deceive you! You have given me your sympathy:—that sympathy has touched some chord in my heart—the chord has vibrated—it vibrates now! Maiden, if I were free, I would kneel at your feet—I would offer you my hand—I would place before you the countless treasures which I have amassed, and which are so well concealed in a distant place that there is no fear of their being discovered."

"I am afraid that I do wrong to listen to you," murmured Finette, whose heart throbbed with joy, while a succession of blushes kept suffusing her cheeks; "you must not therefore talk any more in that strain—but rather proceed to tell me what can be done to effect your freedom. Perhaps you need some proof of your innocence? perhaps you have it in your power to show that the crimes were committed by your hand when you were not present,—crimes which you yourself abhor——"

"How strange—how wonderful," cried De Margaux, "that you understand me thus!—that you penetrate into the truth of these circumstances! Surely, surely there must be some unknown but potent sympathy existing between us! Yes—there *is!* It is a mystical transfusion—sympathy begetting love—and love, I hope, engendering love in return!"

Finette's heart went on throbbing, and her cheeks blushing, and her bosom palpitating. There was something magically soft in the voice of the brigand-captain. To be his bride—his companion, in some far-off clime, or in the depths of some forest, were infinitely preferable to a residence in that gloomy prison, along with a father whose temper was not the sweetest in the world, and who even that very day had spoken so harshly to her.

"It is true," continued De Margaux, "that I was not present when the crime was committed,—true also that when I learnt the atrocity my soul was smitten with horror and anguish. But what could I do? It was too late to repair the evil that was done; and while I was thinking of the best mode to punish the offenders, so as to make them an example to the rest of my band, I was captured. In one point only, sweet Finette, have you misunderstood me. There is no evidence I can procure which will prove mine innocence; because it is sufficient that I am the captain of the band in order to be held responsible for all the misdeeds of my followers. Therefore, if I remain here, I shall perish!—the remorseless myrmidons of the law will take the life of him for whom you have entertained such sweet sympathy! I crave freedom therefore that my life may be saved. Is is no false title which I bear—a Baron's rank it mine; and in the fairest Alpine valley do I possess a charming mansion, situated in the midst of delicious pleasure grounds. Oh! that thither I could bear thee as a bride, and that for the rest of our days we could dwell in that delightful spot, in peace, in safety, and in happiness!"

Finette was bewildered by this speech: her brain appeared to reel with dreams of bliss: she already beheld herself the mistress of that beauteous mansion—roaming through that charming Alpine valley—leaning on the arm of a husband of the most elegant mien. Never had those prison-walls appeared so gloomy and odious to the young maiden. De Margaux fathomed all that was passing in her mind: he perceived the advantage he had already gained; and he continued in his insidious discourse.

"To her who began by giving me her sympathy when sympathy was so much needed—to her who listened to my avowal of love—to her who shall afford me the means of saving a life which will be doubly valuable inasmuch as it must be devoted to the delightful task of ensuring her happiness,—Oh, to *her* of whom I am speaking—to *you*, dearest maiden, shall the faithfullest devotion and the tenderest affection be ever due!"

"But how can I help you?—Oh, how I can help you?" asked Finette, now bursting into tears of anguish.

"Weep not," said De Margaux: "every tear you shed falls like molten lead upon my heart. Tell me, beloved one, is not your father one of the turnkeys of the prison?"

"Alas! yes," responded Finette: "and the fact dooms me to an existence within these dreadful walls—an existence which I abhor!"

"He is a turnkey?" said De Margaux. "You can obtain the key from him? you can possess yourself of it?"

"No—impossible!" rejoined Finette, with a look and tone of the deepest sadness.

"Impossible!" echoed De Margaux, for a moment dejected. "But still you can assist me? Yes, you can assist me! Files—a rope——can you not furnish me these?"

"Yes!" ejaculated the maiden, her countenance suddenly brightening up with joy: then, as rapidly sinking with despondency again, she added, "Ah, I comprehend! But the sentinel on the opposite side of the moat?"

"That obstacle, sweet girl, is not insurmountable," responded De Margaux. "Oh, if you would serve me, Finette—if you would serve me, it is not by halves that you must do it. It is a matter of life and death! You know it—you see that it is!"

"Tell me what I can do," said the girl eagerly: for her heart was now full of the most devoted enthusiasm towards this object of her romantic interest.

"You must manage that sentinel for me! I have noticed that the guard comes round to change the sentinels at ten o'clock—then again at midnight. It is the sentinel who will *then* be on duty that you will have to deal with. Can you get out between those hours, Finette?"

"Yes—for fortunately my father has gone to see his sister in the country, and he is sure not to return before midnight—perhaps not even until to-morrow morning. But what am I to do with regard to that sentinel?" she asked.

"Can you not offer him liquor?" said De Margaux: "will you mind doing this for my sake? It is a husband whom you will win, sweet Finette!—a husband who will love you for your devotion and be proud of you for your heroism!"

"I will do anything—everything you tell me!" replied the enthusiastic but infatuated girl.

"You can give the soldier liquor," continued De Margaux; "and the liquor can be drugged. Start not! I mean not to poison the poor wretch: it is a mere soporific that you will administer. One dram of the liquor thus drugged, and he sinks down senseless. My escape will be secured—I join

you—we flee together—and in happiness we dwell for the remainder of our days!"

Finette agreed to all that De Margaux suggested: he repeated his instructions relative to the files and the cord; and he explained to her what drug she was to purchase at the chemist's, and with what quantity of spirits she was to mix it. Everything was arranged between them: the infatuated girl gave the captive the wine and the tobacco which she had brought: he pressed to his lips the hand that was passed through the *guichet*—she closed the trap-door—and tripped away across the court: while again her heart was beating with hope—her cheeks covered with blushes.

In about a quarter of an hour Finette returned to the *guichet*, and gave the captive the files and the cord. The joy which he experienced at this proof of her continued infatuation on his behalf, infused an almost real enthusiasm into the language that he again addressed to her: her hand was again pressed to his lips—and again did she flit away with palpitating bosom and blushing cheeks.

CHAPTER CXXXIII.

THE STROLLING PLAYERS.

It was about half-past ten o'clock, and the night was tolerably dark,—when the sentinel pacing to and fro on the opposite side of the moat, fancied that he heard light footsteps approaching. He stopped, and was almost immediately accosted by a female enveloped in a cloak. In accordance with her station and with the custom of her country, she wore no bonnet—but a very neat cap, somewhat coquettishly adorned with pink ribbons. The hood of her cloak was purposely thrown back, so that her face might be recognised if the soldier should happen to be acquainted with her—which she knew to be most probable, inasmuch as the regiment had been long in the town, and every private soldier in it had over and over again mounted guard at the principal entrance of the prison as well as on the bank of the moat in the rear.

"Ah! Mademoiselle Finette!" exclaimed the sentinel: "how happens it that you are out so late?"

"I am going to see a friend who has suddenly been taken very ill: she lives in this direction—a little way farther on—upon the outskirt of the town—and as she is not very well off, I am taking her a bottle of brandy."

"Brandy for an invalid!" ejaculated the sentinel jocosely, but not with the slightest scintillation of suspicion that any treachery was intended. "What can the malady be? Is it cholera?"

"Something of that kind," responded Finette. "At all events my father told me I had better take a bottle of brandy with me: and I have it here in my basket."

"The invalid will not require it all, Mademoiselle Finette," said the soldier: "and therefore——"

"Oh! I dare say," interjected the maiden, as if quite ingenuously, "her husband will help her to dispose of it. All men are fond of brandy——"

"And no one more so than myself," rejoined the sentinel with a laugh: and then he smacked his lips significantly.

"Oh, I did not understand!" said Finette, now laughing likewise. "You shall have a taste and be welcome too!"

Thus speaking, the young woman produced the bottle from her basket, and handed it to the soldier. He lowered his firelock until the butt rested upon the ground; and taking the cork from the bottle, applied the latter to his lips. The draught he imbibed was a long one; and scarcely had he given back the bottle into Finette's hand, when he was seized with a sudden dizziness: he staggered—the musket fell forward upon the ground—and the word "Treachery!" escaped his lips.

But it was only uttered lowly; and the next instant he tumbled heavily backward, with a mingled moaning and gasping voice. Finette was seized with affright: the apprehension smote her that he was dead: but the next instant she recovered her self-possession, as she recollected the information De Margaux had given her as to the mode in which the soporific would operate. Then she drew forth a white kerchief, which she waved for a few moments; and as she desisted, a slight splash in the water at the foot of the tower made her aware that her signal had been discerned through the obscurity of the night. It was the rope which De Margaux lowered from the window.

He had worked well during the three or four hours which had elapsed since he received the files from the hand of Finette. The fetters were no longer upon his limbs: one of the massive bars of the window had been eaten through with the iron teeth of the file: no misadventure had occurred to interfere with his plan of escape. And now Finette, as she stood full of anxious suspense on the verge of the moat, beheld a dark form issuing forth from the window of the tower—then descending by means of the rope—then plashing in the water. The moat was very deep, and at that spot about thirty yards wide: but De Margaux was an excellent swimmer—he struck out—and in a few moments reached the bank where Finette so anxiously awaited him, and on which the unconscious sentinel lay. But the noise of the gurgling water, as he glided rapidly through it, had prevented Finette's ears from catching the sounds of footsteps that were advancing across the field which stretched beyond the moat towards the open country. Thus, at the very instant that the now overjoyed maiden extended her hand to assist De Margaux up the bank, a cry of alarm was thundered forth close behind her.

A shriek pealed from her lips: it was the voice of her father which had spoken!

"Help! help! an escape!" he vociferated. "Good heavens, Finette!—Vile girl!—Ah, miscreant!"

These were the ejaculations which in rapid succession burst from the turnkey's lips; and then he grappled with De Margaux. But the struggle lasted only for an instant: De Margaux possessed the strength of ten thousand: desperation rendered him invincible. He hurled the turnkey away

from him with such terrific force that the unfortunate man fell like a weight of lead upon the ground: and the almost distracted Finette, thinking that her father was killed, threw herself in wild agony upon her knees by his side. De Margaux fled from the spot with the speed of a hunted deer; and the next moment, when Finette raised her eyes, he no longer met her view.

We must follow in the footsteps of the escaped criminal. Away he sped across the fields, alike ignorant and reckless of the way which he was taking. He knew full well that the loud ejaculations of the turnkey must have at once raised an alarm inside the prison, and that a pursuit on horseback would promptly take place. He ran for his life. Naught cared he for poor Finette: naught cared he whether he had slain her father by the violence with which he had hurled him to the ground. About a couple of fields off De Margaux found a horse grazing: with very little trouble he captured the animal; and springing on its back, he urged it to its utmost speed by lashing its sides with a stick which he picked up at the time for the purpose. He rode on for several miles, without saddle, bridle, or halter—until the animal was completely knocked up; and then De Margaux abandoned it. There were lights at a little distance, indicating a village or small town; and De Margaux was about to turn off into another direction, when he said to himself, "No! I will go straight on. Those who may be in pursuit, will think to themselves that I am certain to avoid this place; and that is the very reason why I will enter it. Perhaps I shall find some secure concealment there until the storm has blown over?"

De Margaux approached the lights: and as he drew near some very large building—which he soon discovered to be a barn on the outskirts of the village—his ear caught the sounds of music. Very poor and sorry music it was, however; and

De Margaux fancied that it must belong to some itinerant show. He went on; and in a few minutes reached a door at the back of the barn. It stood ajar: he peeped in—and by a dim light which prevailed inside, he perceived that a quantity of straw was piled up against the wall on the right hand just inside the door, and to the distance of about four yards forward. Thus a narrow passage was left from the door to what appeared to be a blanket or dingy sort of drapery, stretching all across the barn and forming a screen to shut out the compartment where the straw was. The sounds of ranting voices, the trampling of feet upon boards, mingled with the applause and laughter of an audience, convinced De Margaux that his first impression was right, and that the performances of some itinerant players were taking place.

"The very last spot in the world," thought De Margaux, "where pursuers would have an idea of looking for me!"—and seizing upon a moment when the applause was long and uproarious, he introduced himself—or rather worked his way, into the midst of the straw; so that he was completely embedded therein—while the noise of the crackling material was drowned by the din of the delighted audience.

The adventurous and chequered career of De Margaux had taken him at times into several countries. We have seen from the explanations of the Viscount Delorme, that he had visited Spain and Italy: we may now add that the British shores had likewise on one occasion been favoured with his presence when the meridian of the French capital was found to be inconveniently hot for a period. Keen, quick-witted, and naturally intelligent, De Margaux readily picked up in a short time a sufficiency of any foreign language to make himself understood; and he had not failed, when in England, to profit by his sojourn there in the same respect. He therefore now had no difficulty in comprehending that it was a company of English strolling players to whose recitations accident was rendering him a listener. He began to reflect that he might turn the circumstance to his advantage. He had a passport, it is true: but it was such an one that he dared not exhibit, inasmuch as it would at once establish his identity. He could not travel without one, if he proceeded alone; and even if he were to shave off his moustache and disguise his person to the utmost of his power, he could not obtain another passport at any town without exhibiting his former one. That there would be a hue and cry, the issue of handbills and the posting of placards offering a reward for his apprehension, he knew full well; and he saw that the best chance for him to escape out of the district, was to mingle with the itinerant company, assume some deep disguise, and travel under the general protecting influence of the manager's passport for his whole troop.

Scarcely had De Margaux revolved these matters in his mind, when the curtain dropped, and the two or three fiddles forming the orchestra struck up a tune. The drapery separating the straw-compartment from the raised platform forming the stage, was now drawn aside; and from his hiding-place De Margaux could obtain a view of the performers. They were evidently of the poorest description: their whole appearance bespoke poverty: —yet was there a great deal of natural gaiety and good-humour amongst them,—as was evidenced by the manner in which they took advantage of the interval between the Acts to partake of refreshment, and the way in which they divided their humble fare with one another. After some trifling changes in the toilets of two or three of them, the partition-drapery was again closed—the curtain drew up—and the play proceeded. The audience was almost entirely French—while the performances were in English: but all proceeded to the infinite satisfaction of the spectators—who, if they comprehended nothing of the splendid orations delivered, were at least hugely delighted with the grimaces and antics of the Clown. Thus the curtain at length fell finally amidst the applause of the entire audience.

We should observe that De Margaux had not the smallest coin in his pocket: all the money he had about him at the time of his arrest, had been taken from him. Neither had he any resources elsewhere,—the tale he had told Finette of his hidden treasures, being as false as that of his beautiful Alpine domain. He was a man addicted to pleasures and profligacies of every description, amongst which gambling was included; and therefore whenever his purse was well filled as the result of some scheme of villany, it was his wont to repair to the great towns in that part of France, and plunge into all kinds of dissipation until his necessities drove him back to the forest to devise some new project or perpetrate some fresh turpitude to refill his pockets. Thus, at the present moment, De Margaux was utterly penniless; and this circumstance rendered it all the more expedient for him to seize, if possible, upon the opportunity to mingle with the itinerant troop.

The barn had been kindly lent by a farmer to this poor travelling company, not merely to serve as the theatre of their performances, but likewise as their temporary abiding-place while they were in that neighbourhood. On the dispersion of the audience, one of the actors issued forth to take down the lamps, or rather lanterns, which had been suspended in front of the barn; and on his return the doors were closed in order to make all safe for the night. Then the manager began counting the proceeds, the troop eagerly gathering around him to hear his report,—although each individual had in his own mind already calculated to almost a fraction what the amount would be. Without precisely specifying it, we may observe that it was of an extent to cheer their humble hearts, and to banish all cares for the present. De Margaux failed not to observe the good-humour and satisfaction which thus prevailed; and he now thought it high time to take advantage of those feelings.

Without being perceived by any of the company, he crept forth from his hiding-place, and suddenly opened and closed the back door as if he had only that instant rushed in. Then the members of the troop all looked round from the middle of the barn where they were assembled; and by the dim light of the single candle which they had left burning, they observed a tall, well-dressed man, of commanding appearance, hurriedly approaching them. A nearer view showed that his garments were shining as if with a recent immersion in water; while his aspect bore the evi-

dences of something very unusual having occurred. His apparel in some parts was stained with mud; and pieces of straw were amongst his hair and whiskers.

His tale—as a matter of course an invented one—was speedily told. He was a gentleman who had experienced the misfortune of losing a very large sum of money through the dishonesty of a friend whom he had trusted; his creditors had dealt harshly with him; they had set the bailiffs on his track; and it was with the utmost trouble, after fording a river and hiding in a farm-yard, that he had succeeded in eluding those harpies of the law. All he wanted was a little temporary succour; for if he could once get to Paris, he had wealthy friends residing there, whose purses would be placed at his disposal; and he should then be enabled most liberally to reward those who might now assist him in his need.

Such were the explanations given by De Margaux to the troop of strolling players; and the effect his words produced was precisely such as he had anticipated. He had enlisted their sympathies by the tale of his misfortunes: he had excited their cupidity by his promises of eventual reward. Their offers of services were promptly and heartily made; and it was left to himself to point out in which manner they could be best rendered available. A disguise, to enable him to elude the bailiffs—his amalgamation, so to speak, amongst the troop, that he might journey under the protection of the passport which served them in common—and a removal from that neighbourhood with the least possible delay,—these were the boons which De Margaux required and the suggestions which he had to offer.

The members of the company had only heard vague reports relative to the capture of a horde of banditti: they were too much occupied with their own concerns to pay particular attention to what was passing around them in a foreign country. Thus, not for a single instant did they mistrust the tale so speciously told them by De Margaux, nor suspect that he was aught beyond what he represented himself. The strollers consisted of about a dozen persons, including the "violins" and the "flageolet;" and three or four of them were females. With these latter De Margaux became an object of especial sympathy: they considered it so shocking that a gentleman with such a handsome moustache should have been deceived by a false friend and hunted by bailiffs through the muddy waters of a river and the slough of a farm-yard. It was a matter of perfect indifference to the entire troop of strollers as to the particular direction in which they proceeded; and they therefore readily yielded to the wish expressed by De Margaux, that by a circuitous route they should make for the capital. A removal from the village-barn at a very early hour in the morning was accordingly resolved upon: but in the meanwhile it was necessary that De Margaux should effectually disguise himself. He commenced by shaving off the moustache and the luxuriant whiskers which had so captivated the ladies of the troop: he likewise cropped the rich growth of his hair. The whole of his face being clean shaved, at once altered his appearance considerably; and a brown wig, supplied by the "theatrical properties," completed the metamorphosis in respect to the head. His own apparel was exchanged for a rusty suit, of quite a different style and fashion, which the manager lent him; and thus, when his toilet was accomplished in a corner of the barn behind a portion of the hanging scenery, it was next to impossible to recognise the late fashionable and almost brilliant De Margaux in the fallen, dilapidated appearance which he now presented. At a very early hour in the morning, a cart was borrowed from the good-natured farmer who had lent the barn; and the strollers, with their new acquaintance and the boxes containing their theatrical properties, took their departure for another place,—De Margaux being careful to direct them in a route which carried him farther off from the scene of his late exploits.

Hitherto he had succeeded in a manner which almost transcended the hopes and expectations he entertained when first resolving to make use of this itinerant company for his own purposes. But still one source of dread haunted his mind. What if any of his companions, two or three of whom understood French, should happen to read the placards which, as he had foreseen, had sprung as it were into existence in a marvellously short space of time? They could scarcely fail to identify him as the escaped felon whose personal appearance at the time of his flight, was described with such painful accuracy in those bills. But he managed so to beguile the way with his conversation—he told so many anecdotes to interest his new companions, that he succeeded in engrossing their whole attention, and preventing them from fixing their regards on a single placard on any of the walls or fences by which they passed. Fortunately likewise, the farmer's man, who drove the cart, could not read; and thus every circumstance appeared to progress favourably for our adventurer.

CHAPTER CXXXIV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

We must now take a temporary leave of the strolling players, and return to the prison whence De Margaux had escaped.

Finette, it will be remembered, had thrown herself in a state of distraction upon the prostrate and inanimate form of her sire, whom she believed to have been killed by the violence with which he was hurled to the ground. He however speedily showed signs of life; and thus a tremendous weight was lifted from the mind of the unfortunate Finette. The alarm raised by the turnkey immediately previous to his struggle with De Margaux, had reached the ears of his brother-doorkeepers inside the prison, as well as of the sentinel who paced in front of it. Several persons therefore were soon upon the spot where the conflict had taken place, and where the drugged soldier still lay senseless, while Finette's father was coming back to consciousness. The fact that De Margaux had escaped was quickly made known; a pursuit was instituted in every direction; and a printing press in the town was promptly set to work to turn out bills and placards offering a reward for his capture. A mounted police-officer passed through the very village in the neighbour-

hood of which De Margaux was at the time making friends with the strollers: but the constable was assured that no person at all answering the felon's description had been seen in the place.

Meanwhile the drugged sentinel was restored to consciousness; and the luckless Finette—amidst torrents of tears and agonized appeals for pardon—confessed all the details of her connivance in the prisoner's escape. By her father she was overwhelmed with reproaches: the sentinel to whom she had given the drugged brandy, upbraided her with an almost equal bitterness: her sire's brother-turnkeys were scarcely less warm in the expression of their sentiments. The unhappy girl was quickly rescued from her infatuation with reference to De Margaux. She now learnt that he himself was in reality a murderer—that there could be no possible mistake on the subject, for that Dame Roquette had that very evening made the fullest and most ample revelations to the gaol-chaplain. The conviction was forced upon Finette, too, that De Margaux was an accomplished deceiver—that his tales of buried treasure and of an Alpine villa were all utterly false—and that he had imposed upon her credulity in every possible way in order to further his own ends. The girl was plunged into the very abyss of mental wretchedness: she was shocked at her own foolish infatuation; and being far from deficient in good principle at the bottom of all her giddiness, she was ready to die with shame, as well as to sink beneath the upbraidings of those by whom she was surrounded.

It was necessary to make an immediate report to the governor of the gaol, who at the time was sleeping soundly in his bed; and this functionary was seized with a violent rage. Finette's father had obtained a half-holiday on the understanding that he was to return to his quarters at eight o'clock that evening: his dereliction of duty was therefore discovered; and the governor failed not to reproach him with the fact that if he had adhered to the rules of the prison, his daughter could not have found an opportunity to carry out her designs. The consequence was that in the morning Finette's father received his dismissal, accompanied with an intimation on the part of the police that he had better get out of the town with the least possible delay, if he were desirous to avoid a still more rigorous chastisement.

This hurricane of calamities well nigh broke poor Finette's heart. Her aunt—to whom a flying visit was paid as she accompanied her father from the town—read her the severest lecture for the mingled folly and wickedness of which she had been guilty, and positively refused to give her an asylum while her father sought for employment elsewhere. The ex-turnkey was accordingly compelled to take his daughter with him: and as he had a brother who was comfortably settled as a draper in a town about eighty miles distant, he resolved to proceed thither in the hope that something might be done for him. He possessed some little savings, to the extent of eighteen or twenty pounds, speaking in English money: and thus he was not as yet compelled to look absolute poverty in the face.

In the *rotonde*, or cheapest part of the *diligence* (stage-coach), the ex-turnkey and Finette took their places for the town to which we have just alluded. Unfortunately for the poor girl, they were the only travellers in that division of the vehicle; and thus her father failed not to continue his upbraidings as they journeyed onward. Finette wept bitterly: she over and over again avowed all her folly and wickedness, and besought her sire's pardon. But he was one of those men who could not be very easily appeased, and who in any case must give the fullest vent to their ill-humour before the word "pardon" could possibly escape their lips. At length the ex-turnkey talked himself off to sleep; and Finette sat pensive and miserable, looking listlessly from the window of the *diligence*.

At one of the post-houses where the coach stopped to change horses—and while her father continued to sleep soundly—Finette's eyes settled upon a placard posted against the wall immediately opposite the window of the *diligence*. She beheld the name of De Margaux: she read the placard: it offered a reward of a thousand francs (forty pounds sterling) for the apprehension of the escaped prisoner. The contents of this bill put Finette's feelings to a new and final test: such an impulse was given to her thoughts that she now unmistakably comprehended whether there were any lingering remnant of the late infatuation in her soul—or whether her love had turned to hatred. She understood likewise whether, if De Margaux suddenly appeared before her, even with veritable proofs of his buried treasure and of his Alpine villa, she would flee away with him to share his riches,—or whether she would remain with her sire, to endure his upbraidings as often as the humour for venting them might take possession of him.

The *diligence* continued its way, and Finette shed no more tears—but remained plunged in deep and gloomy meditation, until her father woke up and renewed his reproaches. Finette listened to them in silence: she no longer entreated his forgiveness—there was even something dull and apathetic in the appearance of the young girl. Her father deemed her indifferent to the calamities which had overtaken him; and he redoubled his upbraidings. Still Finette said nothing; and again did the ex-turnkey talk till he was tired—so that relapsing into slumber, he slept for the last three or four hours of the journey.

The night was setting in when the *diligence* entered the town which was the destination of Finette and her father. It was too late for them to call on their relation until the morrow; and they therefore took up their quarters at a small inn—or rather public-house, in the neighbourhood of the office where the coach stopped. In the morning the ex-turnkey set out to proceed alone, in the first instance, to his brother's: but on arriving at the house he found that its master had gone on the preceding day to Paris, where he was likely to be detained for a week. The draper was an unmarried man, and had left his little establishment in the charge of a clerk; so that the ex-turnkey could not even obtain an asylum at the house until his brother's return. As the reader may suppose, he retraced his way to the tavern in no very enviable humour, and fully prepared to vent all his vexation upon the head of poor Finette.

The young girl still bore her sire's treatment in uncomplaining silence, and with an air of dull and listless apathy. He resolved to remain at the public-house until his brother should return; and thus a week went by. During this interval Finette was most attentive to her father in all the ministrations which as a daughter she could display: but she never once answered him when he reproached her—nor did she again beseech his forgiveness. He began to think that he had mistaken her disposition—that she was not really indifferent nor apathetic—but that her spirit was broken. He therefore thought that he had said enough to her—probably too much; and he suddenly desisted from his upbraidings, though he was of too dogged and morose a nature to volunteer the pardon which was now no longer asked.

The brother returned from Paris, having experienced a considerable pecuniary loss by the business which had taken him thither. He himself was of a rugged and unfeeling disposition, devoted to money-grubbing pursuits: he showed no inclination to assist his brother with his purse, though he was ready enough to proffer his counsel, and likewise to lecture Finette severely for her own misconduct. He somewhat churlishly said that his relations might stay with him for a short time, until they could settle themselves in some manner; and thus they shifted their quarters to his house from the tavern where they had been staying. Finette's father had in the meanwhile been looking about for some employment: but he could find nothing that suited him. There was a shop doing a good little business to be disposed of; and it was in a trade which the ex-turnkey and his daughter could manage: but the purchase-money was fifty pounds, and Finette's father had only about fifteen left. His brother would not advance him a single franc; and thus he found himself compelled to renounce the hope of obtaining a business which would have afforded him a better livelihood than even that post of turnkey from which he had so lately been discharged.

One afternoon—about ten days after the arrival of Finette and her father in the town of which we are speaking—the young damsel strolled forth in a very disconsolate mood. Feeling that her parent and herself were regarded as a burden upon the means of her avaricious uncle, she longed to use her own industry for the purpose of earning something. She had on the previous day applied in various quarters for needle-work—but without being enabled to obtain it. She now renewed her applications—but still without success. At two or three warehouses which she entered, she experienced overtures on the part of insolent clerks or masters which brought the blood up to her cheeks; and on one occasion so gross was the insult she received, she burst into tears and went weeping along the street. Perceiving that she was the object of attention with the passers-by—and unable to restrain her sobs—she issued out of the town towards a grove which bounded it in that particular direction. There she sat down upon a bank where some autumnal flowers bespangled the grass; and wiping away her tears, she fell into a profound reverie.

We have already said that Finette was exceedingly pretty; and it was distressing to think that a young girl endowed with so many personal charms, and whose errors had been those of the head rather than of the mind, should now experience so much deep affliction. But thus it was. She felt that her father was almost ruined; and she reproached herself as the cause. Apart however from these self-upbraidings, there was something brooding in her mind—an idea which for several days past she had rivetted her attention upon,—an idea which she longed to carry out, but for which purpose she knew not the means.

Finette had been seated for perhaps about half-an-hour on that flower-bespangled bank, embowered amidst the verdure of the grove,—when she heard footsteps approaching; and looking up, she beheld a strange figure. It was a tall man, with his face clean shaven—wearing an ample brown wig, indifferently frizzed, and surmounted by a hat with slouching brims. His apparel was of the very shabbiest description, and scarcely seemed to have been originally made for him. His linen was far from the cleanest; and altogether he looked not one who might be classed amongst the number of fortune's favourites. We need hardly inform the reader that this was none other than De Margaux. The troop of strolling players had arrived in the town that very morning, and were to exhibit themselves at the theatre in the evening. De Margaux—who took no share in the stage-performances, but only managed to render himself useful behind the scenes—was invariably accustomed to seek as much privacy as possible during the daytime, for fear lest at any town where they stopped he might encounter an officer sufficiently lynx-eyed to penetrate through his disguise. Thus, on the present occasion, he had left his companions at the tavern where they put up; and quitting the town, he had sought the grove with the intention of plunging into its depths and reposing himself until the shades of evening closed in. While threading his way into the midst of the wood, he beheld a female seated upon a bank: and before she herself had raised her countenance, he had recognised Finette.

It immediately struck De Margaux that the young girl had either been compelled by circumstances, or else prompted by her infatuation, to abandon her home and launch herself forth in the world in search of him. His natural pride and conceit engendered this belief in a moment; and in other respects it was certainly natural enough, when he found her so far from her native place—the more especially as it never struck De Margaux that her father might have lost his situation through his daughter's imprudence. He did not however immediately advance towards her: he stood still for a few moments to see if she recognised him. But after simply glancing at De Margaux, Finette averted her eyes: she had not the remotest suspicion that in the comparatively miserable object before her, she beheld the handsome, elegant-mannered, fascinating individual who for several hours had obtained over her heart a degree of influence such as in ordinary cases an acquaintance of months and years could scarcely have engendered.

De Margaux looked around: Finette was evidently alone: she had relapsed into her gloomy reverie—she was apparently in a distressed state of mind. De Margaux therefore felt convinced

that she was a wanderer, either voluntary or outcast, from the paternal home; and touched by her exceeding beauty—of which he had retained a vivid impression, though not one particle of real love did he experience for her—he longed to possess her as a mistress.

Approaching her, he said in the most harmonious accents of his naturally fine voice, "Finette, do you not know me?"

For an instant the young damsel started as if suddenly stung by a serpent lurking amidst the grass whereon she sat; and her dark eyes swept their looks hastily over De Margaux's form. At the same time an expression, which appeared to be that of terror, flitted across her features: but it was instantaneously succeeded by a smile; and springing up from her seat, she ejaculated with an air of mingled astonishment and joy, "Good heavens, sir! is it you?"

"Yes, dearest Finette," responded De Margaux; "it is I who have never ceased to love you!"—and he threw his arm round her waist.

"Oh, if this were true!" she ejaculated, quickly disengaging herself, and springing back a pace or two as if for the purpose of studying his countenance well, that she might know whether she dared confide in him.

"Yes, Finette—it is true!" exclaimed De Margaux. "Tell me—does the assurance give you pleasure? Have you been looking for me?"

"Yes!" cried the young damsel, giving an affirmative in her turn. "Oh! I have wandered and wandered so far and so wearily!"

"It is, then, as I thought!" cried De Margaux. "You were not angry with me, Finette, that I fled so precipitately on that memorable night——"

"Angry with you?" she ejaculated. "Oh, no! In one sense, I rejoiced that you succeeded in effecting your escape—though in another sense I was very, very sad——"

"Ah, I comprehend you, dearest Finette!" said the villain, assuming a look of the deepest tenderness, while he took her hand which she abandoned to him. "You were sad because I was compelled to fly alone and that you were unable to accompany me? Ah! my dear Finette, I have been truly wretched on your account! I have pictured to myself all kinds of horrors—your father's indignation—his brutal treatment of you——"

"I remained not to encounter it," answered Finette: "he would have killed me if I had stayed! I fled from home—I have wandered about——"

"And you confess, dearest girl, that you entertained the hope of falling in with me?" said De Margaux.

"Oh!" exclaimed Finette, her countenance lighting up with a sudden animation; "if I had not entertained this hope, I could not have supported myself under the sense of such terrible calamities! Yes—oh, yes! I have longed to fall in with you!"

"Dear, dear Finette!"—and De Margaux strained her to his breast. "Dearest Finette, how I love you!"

"But you?" she said, again disengaging herself from his arms, "were you veritably and truly happy thus to fall in with me?"

"Can you possibly doubt it?" exclaimed De Margaux. "Shall I tell you wherefore I assumed this disguise? It was not so much to assist in eventually effecting my escape from the pursuit set after me, as to carry out a desperate purpose which I had formed. It was my intention to dare everything on your account—to retrace my way—yes, at any risk, no matter how great——"

"Oh, then, you really love me?" cried Finette, a joyous expression appearing upon her countenance: "and you were coming in search of me?"

"Yes! And now that we have met, dearest one," said De Margaux, "it shall be to part no more! Will you not give me a similar assurance?"

Finette looked up with her beautiful black eyes into the villain's countenance for a moment: then she suddenly cast her glances downward—and while a blush suffused her cheeks, she murmured, "But you will make me your wife?"

"Oh, assuredly!" exclaimed De Margaux; "I will fulfil every promise I made to you at the time! Ah, by the bye, did those people at the gaol endeavour to set you against me? did they vilify me in your hearing? did they——"

"My feelings were too bewildered with mingled joy and grief, as I have already explained to you," answered Finette, "to enable me to attend to anything which was said at the time. The rest of that night I passed at our quarters in the prison: but very early in the morning I gathered together my few jewels and my little savings—three or four hundred francs—and I fled."

"And those jewels? and those savings?" said De Margaux, inwardly chuckling at the intelligence he had just received, and resolving to cut the society of the strolling players with the least possible delay in order to make Finette his sole companion.

"My jewels and my money," responded the young damsel, "are at a little lodging which I have taken in the town. Oh! I have been very economical, I can assure you! for I did not know how long it might be before——"

"Before you and I encountered each other again?" said De Margaux: "is it not so? Ah, that tell-tale blush, my sweet Finette! Well, you have husbanded your resources; and it is so much the better. We will fly away together at once! We will proceed into Switzerland: and there the priest shall join our hands in marriage. When will you come, dearest? when will you be ready to set off?"

"Oh! if I thought you would be always kind and good to me," said Finette,—"that you would always speak as gently and as fondly as you are speaking now——"

"Can you possibly distrust me? can you doubt my love?" asked De Margaux, taking her hand and gazing with passion upon her countenance,—but with a passion most sensuously different from that which his words appeared to express.

"I believe you—Oh, I believe you!" exclaimed Finette. "It will take me an hour to complete my little preparations——"

"And then you will rejoin me?" cried De Margaux. "And where is there a better spot for our next meeting than this very one where we have been so happily brought together? I will await you here, Finette. Need I hint, dearest girl, at the necessity of observing the utmost caution? You will not breathe a syllable to a soul——"

"Oh! rest assured," exclaimed the young damsel, "that all my precautions shall be taken with the most careful regard as to the result. And now farewell for the present! You will be sure to meet me here——"

"And you, Finette, will be sure to come?"

"Within the hour that is passing," she rejoined: and giving him her hand for a moment, she glided away from his presence.

Finette issued from the wood, and sped back into the town. On arriving at her uncle's house, she found her father sitting in a gloomy mood in the parlour, up-stairs, above the shop.

"Where have you been, Finette?" he angrily demanded: for through vexation and disappointment all his irritable feelings had suddenly revived against his daughter. "I will not have you wandering about by yourself——you will get into mischief—and even worse things will happen to you than what has already taken place."

"No, father—never!" exclaimed Finette vehemently.

"Then if you mean to keep yourself steady and respectable for the future," continued her sire, "you would do well to look out for some employment, or else for a situation. I cannot keep you in idleness——I mean to take a situation myself, however humble it may be; for I will not live as a burden upon your uncle, who seems to grudge us every morsel of food we put into our mouths. Oh, Finette! you have been my ruin!"

"Say not so, father! And yet it is too true! Relative to that shop which you thought of taking——"

"Nonsense, the shop!" vociferated the ex-turnkey: "you know that I have not the means—and it is just the same as if you were throwing my poverty in my teeth."

"But is it not possible," proceeded Finette, "to raise by any means what you require?"

"Ah! if I could make a thousand stones into as many francs," exclaimed the ex-turnkey, with morose bitterness, "I might enter in possession of the shop to-morrow. But as it is, that idea is all vain! And now, Finette——"

"Father," she interrupted him—at the same time gazing on his countenance with a peculiar significancy,—"will you follow my instructions?—I mean, will you act according to the advice I am about to give you?"

"Why, what does the girl mean?" exclaimed her sire, thinking for a moment that her intellects were affected.

"You must ask me no questions, but do as I suggest:"—and there was something in the damsel's look and manner which induced her father to attend very seriously to the words she was about to speak.

"What am I to do, Finette?" he inquired.

"Procure a stout cord," she replied; "and in half-an-hour come to the verge of that grove which you perceive at the extremity of this long street. Do not penetrate into the grove until you hear me call you."

"What child's play is this?" demanded the ex-turnkey angrily. "I thought you were going to tell me of some means whereby to obtain employment, and which had perhaps accidentally come to your knowledge."

"It is a simple thing, father, which I ask you to do," responded Finette; "and you will not be long ere you learn my object. I do not think that you will then be angry. You must know, dear father, that whatever my faults, I am incapable of making you the object of a jest."

"Well then, Finette, I will act according to your bidding. A stout cord, you say? and I am to remain on the outskirt of the grove until you summon me into its depths? I cannot for the life of me conceive——"

"Father, I will give you no explanations now!" interrupted the damsel. "Do what I have said—and you will thank me. Fail—and you will be sorry!"

Without waiting for any response, Finette hurried from the room. She proceeded to her own chamber, where she packed a number of articles in a tolerably large market-basket; and slinging this to her arm she again went forth from the house. Proceeding straight to a tavern she purchased a bottle of wine, which she placed in her basket. She thence repaired to a chemist's, at whose establishment she bought some fluid drug: and having also consigned the phial to her basket, she continued her way. On emerging from the town, she stopped in a sheltered place—a sort of open shed—and there she remained for a few minutes, while she poured forth a portion of the wine and filled up the bottle with the contents of the phial procured at the chemist's. She then sped to the grove; and plunging into its depths, found De Margaux anxiously expecting her arrival.

"You are come, dearest Finette!" he exclaimed, springing forward to receive her; "and all your preparations are complete," he added, glancing at the basket.

"Yes," she replied. "I have not kept you long in suspense. But whither are we to go? in which direction are we to bend our way? and how are we to travel?"

"It depends, dear girl," said De Margaux, "on the extent of our resources. To speak frankly, I am utterly denuded of funds until we reach Switzerland; and there——But methought you spoke of a few hundred francs?"

"Yes," rejoined Finette; and then, with an air of ingenuousness, she asked, "Will such a sum suffice to take us into Switzerland?"

"To be sure!" exclaimed De Margaux; and greedily anxious to ascertain the amount which, through the medium of Finette, he thought himself able to command, he added, "But let us ascertain precisely the state of our finances. Come, let us sit down for a few minutes; and we will deliberate on our plans."

The damsel sat down accordingly; and De Margaux placed himself by her side. Holding the basket in her lap, she opened it, as if about to produce her money and jewels;—and lest the mention of jewels in respect to a French turnkey's daughter should appear strange to the English reader, we may as well observe that there are few females of the humbler class in France who do not possess their trinkets of this description.

"Ah! what have you there?" exclaimed De Margaux, who, the instant the basket was opened, caught sight of the bottle which was lying on the top of all the other articles that Finette had packed together ere leaving the house.

"It is a bottle of wine which I have purchased

for our refreshment," responded Finette: "for I knew not whether we should have to journey on foot——"

"Nothing could come more acceptably!" exclaimed De Margaux: "for I am suffocating with thirst."

"Oh! how glad I am," cried Finette, with an expression of joy upon her countenance, "that I should have had this forethought!"

Thus speaking, she took out the bottle from the basket, and handed it to De Margaux.

"I am afraid it is only poor wine," observed Finette: "for I did not like to be too extravagant."

"Right, dear girl!" said De Margaux. "I have no doubt it will be good enough for me to celebrate in a long draught this happy meeting, which has restored us to each other."

With these words, De Margaux applied the bottle to his lips; and being in reality sore athirst at the time, he imbibed a considerable quantity. Finette watched him with a singular expression of countenance,—eager suspense being mingled with terror,—until all in a moment the bottle fell from his hand, and the remainder of its contents poured forth upon the grass. Finette sprang up to her feet, and darted back a few paces as if to place herself at such a distance that the villain should not be enabled to do her a mischief. A fiend-like expression suddenly took possession of his countenance: he strove to rise from the bank—but he could not; and with the words, "Wretch! treachery!" upon his lips, he sank helplessly back against a tree.

"Ah, it is the lesson which you taught me!" exclaimed Finette: and then she cried out, "Father—father—come!"

In a few moments the rapid approach of some one through the wood reached the damsel's ears; and her sire was quickly upon the spot. He beheld an unconscious form lying upon the bank: the first idea which struck him was that the man was dead; and with a look full of horrified alarm, he glanced towards his daughter.

"He is not dead, father!" said Finette: "he is only as that sentinel was the other night on the verge of the moat. The lesson he has taught me——"

"What, Finette?" ejaculated her father, as a light flashed in unto his mind: "is it possible? But no! What does it all mean? This is not——"

"Yes, father," said the damsel, quietly: "this is De Margaux. Bind him—he is your prisoner—you alone have captured him—there is none to dispute your right to the reward—nor to demand a share of it. And it will enable you to take possession of the shop to morrow!"

Finette's father listened in mingled astonishment and joy at these words which flowed from her lips: and he lost no time in fastening around the limbs of the unconscious De Margaux the cord which he had brought.

"Now, Finette," he exclaimed, half wild with delight, "let me embrace thee, girl!—and you shall never hear another syllable of reproach from my lips! No—you have atoned for your faults! Forsooth, after all, I am glad that it has happened! We shall be better off than ever we were!"

He embraced his daughter: but she rather submitted to his caress than received it with satisfaction; and he exclaimed, "Why, what ails you, girl? You do not seem happy——"

"Father," she responded, with a strange seriousness of countenance—a seriousness which even appeared to have something sinister and ominous in it,—"I have done something which will for ever prevent me from knowing what happiness is in this life. I have betrayed a fellow-creature to the scaffold for the sake of gold. All murderer though he be, I would not have done this, were it not that I had an atonement to make unto yourself. My conduct towards that man has this day been fraught with a degree of dissimulation and treachery which—all murderer though he be, I repeat—I am utterly ashamed of, and for which I loathe myself. However—*you*, father, will now reproach me no more. The idea has been hovering in my mind from the very first moment that I read the placard offering a reward for that man's apprehension. It was when we were journeying in the *diligence*—and when I was nearly driven to madness by your reproaches. Oh! then I said to myself, 'If I could surrender him up to justice!'—Ah! the idea was then vague and shadowy enough: but it has been fulfilled. It is done, father——the atonement is made—and you will be enabled to settle yourself in life. Hark! a vehicle is passing! I will return in a few moments."

With these words, Finette glided away from the presence of her sire,—who was half astonished, half frightened at the singular language in which she had just addressed him. He was not however on that account inclined to abandon his prey; and he stooped down to assure himself that the cord was firmly knotted upon the limbs of the unconscious De Margaux. Meanwhile Finette had sped into the road, where she stopped a baker's cart that was passing. Into this vehicle the still inanimate De Margaux was conveyed; and when he came back to consciousness, he was the inmate of a dungeon, with chains upon his limbs.

Ere closing the present chapter, we may bring this episode to a termination. Finette's father claimed and received the reward which was offered for the apprehension of De Margaux; and he was enabled to take the shop which he had so much coveted. His business has thriven; and he is now a man well to do in the world. His daughter Finette still lives: but she is only the shadow of her former self: she is pale, thin, and wasted. She is never seen to smile; and she moves slowly and noiselessly as a ghost about her father's house when superintending the domestic arrangements. Her words spoken in the grove, were indeed too prophetically true. Finette and happiness have shaken hands for ever.

The confession of Dame Roquette implicated several of the gang in the murder of the two postilions and Lord Octavian's valet. The wretches whose guilt was thus made manifest, suffered along with De Margaux on the scaffold of the guillotine: Dame Roquette and the rest of the band were visited with the next severest penalties of the law;—and thus justice succeeded in overtaking all the offenders who were implicated in the crimes of the forest.

CHAPTER CXXXV.

THE DUKE AND HIS MISTRESS.

THE scene now changes to the British metropolis again; and we must introduce the reader to the interior of the house which the Duke of Marchmont had taken in a fashionable quarter for the accomodation of his mistress, Mrs. Oxenden. The reader cannot have forgotten the circumstances under which this lady had foisted, if not forced herself upon the protection of the Duke; for be it borne in mind that the power which she wielded over him was derived from the fact that she had become a listener to a certain conversation between himself and Barney the Barker on the night of the grand entertainment that was given in Belgrave Square.

The house was sumptuously furnished; and there was a large establishment of domestics. Mrs. Oxenden appeared determined to do nothing by halves. She herself went to the most fashionable silversmiths, and ordered a costly service of plate; she visited jewellers' and several other shops in a similar manner, and made her purchases as if the wealth of the Indies were at her disposal. Every one of the bills, as they were sent home in rapid succession, she enclosed to the Duke of Marchmont, with a request that they might be immediately liquidated. The Duke purchased for her a very handsome equipage, consisting of a carriage and pair: but Mrs. Oxenden also required saddle horses—for she was a good equestrian, and was proud of displaying her fine figure in a riding-habit. She therefore increased her stud at the Duke of Marchmont's expense; and, in short, she appeared resolved not to deny herself anything that she set her mind upon.

Thus scarcely had a month elapsed since the

date which had given the Duke of Marchmont his new mistress, before he found that he was many thousand pounds out of pocket; and that if she went on in the same expensive manner, it would be productive of serious inconveniences, notwithstanding the magnitude of the income which he enjoyed. He had foreseen from the very first that her imperious temper was likely to cause him much annoyance; and a few little examples which she had given him of her domineering disposition, had shown that his presage was by no means ill-founded. He bitterly cursed the unfortunate incident which had rendered him the slave of such a connexion; and he saw the necessity of asserting a will of his own if he would not have that imperious woman put her foot completely upon his neck. Although she was so exceedingly handsome, and possessed a figure of such perfectly modelled and voluptuous beauty,—yet did he take no pleasure in the possession of such a mistress: there was something in her character which filled him with dread whenever he found himself in her presence; and though she was of a temperament which burnt with the strongest fires of sensuous passion, yet was she deficient in those little blandishments and charming fascinations which constitute the real seductive powers of woman.

A magnificent set of diamonds valued at nearly eight thousand guineas, had for some little time been exhibited at the shop of a fashionable jeweller in Bond Street. Numbers of persons belonging to the higher order had been to inspect them; and several offers were made for the purchase of the set: but the jeweller would not abate one shilling of the price which he had originally put upon the gems. Wives had endeavoured to wheedle their husbands, and young ladies their papas, into the purchase of the diamonds—but without effect. Weeks had passed since their first display; and there they remained.

At length, one afternoon, Mrs. Oxenden alighted from her splendid equipage and entered the shop to make a few purchases. She had been on the previous day attracted by something she had seen in the windows; and hence this visit. It was the first time she had patronised the particular establishment in question; and she had not heard of the diamonds that were exhibited for sale in the show-room up-stairs. The shopman who served her—fancying from her own distinguished appearance, and from the brilliant style of her equipage, that she must be a person of some consequence—inquired whether she had seen the diamonds?—and on receiving a response in the negative, he begged that she would condescend to inspect them. To the show-room Mrs. Oxenden accordingly ascended. It was at that hour in the afternoon when fashionable loungers of both sexes are wont to drop in at such establishments, either to while away the time, or to see if there be anything new which may strike their fancies. The show-room on this occasion was more than ordinarily thronged; and the diamonds were the centre of attraction. Several ladies of rank were present with their husbands or fathers; and many a cajoling word was whisperingly spoken from beauteous lips, in the hope that the diamonds would be won as the reward of the honied language. But the sum was too great; and thus the cajoling was useless.

Mrs. Oxenden made her appearance, escorted by the shopman from below. As she entered the room, the glance which she swept around, showed her that Colonel Tressilian was present. This was the officer whose mistress she had formerly been,—the same whom she had encountered at Marchmont House in Belgrave Square, and who had threatened to expose her if she did not retire from the entertainment. *Then* she had felt herself to be in his power: *now* she no longer dreaded exposure—she had accepted the position of a kept mistress—and she was prepared to arm herself with all the false pride and hauteur of a brazen hardihood.

She affected not to perceive Colonel Tressilian; and he was by no means likely to court a recognition on her part; for a young and beautiful wife whom he had married about a year back, was leaning upon his arm. We should observe however that it was by no means generally known that Mrs. Oxenden was the Duke of Marchmont's mistress—although, as a matter of course, there were whispers in certain quarters to that effect.

Colonel and Mrs. Tressilian were amongst a group engaged in the inspection of the much-coveted diamonds; there was however space sufficient to afford Mrs. Oxenden room to take her place at the table in the middle of which they stood beneath a glass globe.

"Are they not beautiful?" she heard Mrs. Tressilian whisper to her husband.

"They are truly magnificent, my dear," responded the Colonel, in the same low tone.

Mrs. Oxenden heard Mrs. Tressilian heave a profound sigh, which was full of longing covetousness, as she continued to gaze upon the diamonds.

"You know, my dear," continued the Colonel, still speaking in a whisper, which he supposed to be audible only to his wife's ear, "nothing would afford me greater pleasure than to purchase those gems for you. I offered a cheque for seven thousand, as you well know—but it was refused; and I am sure you cannot wish me to go any higher?"

"No, certainly not!" rejoined his wife. "But still"—and with another deep sigh she stopped short.

"I see that you are very anxious to have them," proceeded the Colonel: "and it is no wonder! I tell you what I will do, my love: I will offer seven thousand five hundred for them—and I dare say the cheque to that amount will not be refused."

"Oh, how kind and good of you!" answered his wife. "I already consider them to be mine! And to confess the truth, I had so completely set my heart upon them——"

"Now that you tell me this, I cannot possibly suffer you to be disappointed," interjected Colonel Tressilian. "Come—let us go and give the jeweller his own price, whatever it may be."

The eyes of the beautiful Mrs. Tressilian lighted up with ecstatic joy as she accompanied her husband from the show-room,—neither having the remotest suspicion that any portion of their discourse had been overheard. Mrs. Oxenden beheld the door close behind them; and a fiendish expression of triumph flashed in the depths of her large dark orbs.

"These diamonds are truly magnificent," she said to the shopman who had conducted her to the show-room.

"Everybody has admired them, ma'am," he responded; "and many offers have been made."

"What is the price?" inquired Mrs. Oxenden.

"Eight thousand guineas, ma'am," was the shopman's answer; "with a discount of five per cent. for ready money."

"And these are the lowest terms?" said the lady.

"The very lowest, ma'am:"—and the shopman began to look eager; for he perceived that there was a chance of her being a purchaser—but he also feared lest she should slip through his hands.

Mrs. Oxenden examined the diamonds more closely; and all the other personages present looked on with interest—for they likewise thought that a purchaser was found at last. The door opened: Colonel and Mrs. Tressilian reappeared—and at that very instant Mrs. Oxenden said to the shopman, "I will give you your price for the diamonds: they are mine."

"Oh, how unfortunate!" was the involuntary ejaculation which burst from Mrs. Tressilian's lips, and the meaning of which may be explained to the effect that the proprietor of the establishment had just stepped out, but was expected to return in a few minutes, when Colonel Tressilian, in order to gratify his wife, would have been prepared to meet his demand.

All eyes were turned from Mrs. Oxenden towards Mrs. Tressilian, who with the twofold vexation of disappointment, and of having betrayed it, could not prevent the tears from forcing their way. Nothing could exceed the annoyance of Colonel Tressilian himself, when Mrs. Oxenden darted a look of haughty triumph upon him and of contemptuous pity upon his wife. The Colonel grew pale and bit his lips with concentrated rage: then turning suddenly on his heel, he led his wife forth from the room.

Mrs. Oxenden accompanied the shopman to the counting-house,—the proprietor of the establishment having just returned. He was by no means prepared to trust a stranger with such a costly amount of property—nor even to send the diamonds to her house without previous payment. Nor did she choose to expose herself to the humiliation of a refusal on the point. She therefore desired that he would send the bill in an envelope to his Grace the Duke of Marchmont; and she intimated that it would be paid on presentation. The jeweller bowed, and attended the lady forth to her carriage. He now comprehended that she was a Duke's mistress: but it was no concern of his, so long as the bill was paid—of which he entertained not the slightest doubt.

And the bill *was* paid; and the diamonds were sent home to Mrs. Oxenden. But the Duke of Marchmont was astounded at this act of extravagance,—an extravagance which was more wilful and wanton than any whereby he had previously found himself victimised on Mrs. Oxenden's account. Accordingly, on the following day, at about the hour of noon, he proceeded to the residence of his new mistress, with the firm resolution of remonstrating against her conduct. She expected this visit; and she was prepared to give Marchmont such a reception as she deemed most suitable under the circumstances. It was by no means her intention to wheedle nor to cajole him, nor to take the trouble of condescending to blandishments: she had assumed the attitude of an imperious mistress from the very first—a mistress in two senses of the term; and she did not feel inclined to step down from her pedestal. She was apparelled in a dark dress which set off the symmetry of her shape to the fullest advantage of its superb contours; and she felt all a woman's pride in the consciousness of her grand beauty.

The Duke, feeling that circumstances had become exceedingly serious, had summoned all his courage to his aid; and on entering the apartment where Mrs. Oxenden received him, he at once broached the purport of his visit.

"You drew heavily upon me yesterday," he said; "and it was at least very inconsiderate to take such a step without previously consulting me. It might have happened that I had not sufficient in my bankers' hands to meet the cheque which I was at once compelled to draw——"

"And doubtless your bankers would have honoured it all the same," said Mrs. Oxenden, with a species of haughty composure.

"But I would not overdraw them for the world," answered the Duke. "That is not however the precise question. It is whether or not——"

"There is no question at all," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden. "On the night that you and I were so strangely thrown together, you said to me, 'You are poor; I will make you rich: there is nothing you can ask which I will not grant: money in abundance; riches; gold; and gifts.'—These were your promises. Are you fulfilling them when you play the part of a niggard for a few thousand pounds? It is not the first time that you have made a grimace on account of my purchases; and it would seem, therefore, as if we did not have a thorough understanding together at the outset. If not, let us have it now."

"There is moderation in all things," replied the Duke of Marchmont; "and you ought to be reasonable. Frankly speaking, I have not the means to support such marvellous extravagancies as these——"

"And I tell you, my lord," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, her dark eyes now flashing angrily, "that you *do* possess the means, and that you *shall* furnish me with them! You are immensely rich; and I am positively ashamed of you for daring——Yes, I will use the word *daring*—to come and plead pauperism in my presence."

"Mrs. Oxenden," exclaimed the Duke, making a desperate effort to assert his own empire over her imperiousness, "I cannot and will not minister to your boundless extravagancies. If you choose to be reasonable henceforth, we will say nothing more of the past. Two or three thousand a-year will keep you in affluence; and this amount I do not grudge—very far from it!"

"Enough, my lord!" ejaculated the lady; "it is high time for me to speak. Not many weeks have elapsed since a young Hindoo woman was nearly murdered——"

"Why refer to this?" demanded the Duke. "Did you not promise——"

"That the seal of secrecy should remain upon my lips," continued Mrs. Oxenden, "so long as you remained faithful to your own side of the compact. In one word, my lord, you are in my power—and you know it. Recollect, I overheard

everything which took place between yourself and the ruffian who was your hired bravo. It was the Lady Indora whose life was aimed at——"

"For God's sake, be quiet!" moaned the wretched Duke of Marchmont, rising from his seat and pacing the room with the most feverish agitation.

"Nay—since we are upon the subject, and you yourself have compelled me thus to refer thereto, it were better that you should hear me out. The Duke of Marchmont must have very potent reasons for desiring to take the life of the Lady Indora; and perhaps her ladyship herself would be thankful were I to give her such information as would prove that it is none other than the said Duke of Marchmont——"

"She knows it! she knows it!" exclaimed the wretched nobleman.

"Well, *she* may know it," proceeded Mrs. Oxenden, rising from her seat, and bending her looks menacingly upon the cowering Duke: "but the tribunal of justice does not know it! *She* may have her reasons for sparing you: *the law* would have none! Oh you are so completely in my power, dare you play the niggard? dare you grudge me these paltry thousands which are a reward so well earned for keeping your secret?"

"Enough! I beseech you to say no more!" exclaimed the Duke. "We shall understand each other better for the future! Pray forget that I remonstrated at all!"

"I am perfectly willing that we should be good friends again," said Mrs. Oxenden, with the patronising air of an imperious mistress bestowing her forgiveness: "but remember, I must hear no more of these remonstrances when I take it into my head to spend a few pounds."

The Duke of Marchmont—finding himself utterly beaten, and that Mrs. Oxenden was resolved to wield her power most despotically over him—thought that the best course he could adopt was to conciliate instead of irritating. He accordingly made all kinds of promises in accordance with the lady's humour; and he took his departure, inwardly anathematising himself for having woven a tangled web of crime which day by day and hour by hour was enmeshing him more and more.

The Duke of Marchmont had not long issued from Mrs. Oxenden's house, when an old gentleman knocked at the front door. When the summons was answered by a footman in gorgeous livery, this old gentleman said, "Is Mrs. Oxenden at home?"

"She is, sir," was the answer. "What name shall I announce?"

"What name?" echoed the old gentleman, nervously. "No matter! Be good enough to introduce me to Mrs. Oxenden's presence. I—I—knew her at Brighton."

The footman had no orders to refuse admittance to any visitor: he of course comprehended that the mistress whom he served, was mistress in another sense to the Duke of Marchmont; and he thought this old gentleman, having known her previously, might possibly have very good reasons for declining to give his name. The lacquey accordingly hesitated no longer to introduce the visitor into the splendidly furnished drawing-room where Mrs. Oxenden was seated.

"Ah, is it you?" she said, quite coolly and collectedly, as if it were a visit of mere ordinary interest. "Pray sit down:"—then, as the door closed behind the domestic, her manner all in an instant changed; and it was even with fierceness that she demanded, "What brings you hither?"

"To assure myself with my own eyes," responded the old gentleman, "that the rumour which reached me is true—that you are living here in gilded infamy——"

Mrs. Oxenden burst out into an ironical laugh.

"Are you come to preach sermons to me?" she exclaimed. "If so, let me assure you at once that I am not prepared to listen to them. Between you and me everything is ended, so far as the ties of husband and wife are concerned. But I did not leave you through any animosity: it was through self-interest. I am enriching myself; and if you like I can put you in a way of enriching yourself. Now do not be a fool, Mr. Oxenden! You must know very well that an old man such as you are——But no matter! I repeat, I have no animosity against you; and therefore I do not wish to say anything to annoy. You can resign me without a sigh; and as you are not overburdened with this world's goods, you will not perhaps lose the opportunity of improving your position. This you may do at the same time that you will be benefitting me——"

"What mean you?" inquired Mr. Oxenden, whose first feelings of bitterness were yielding to others of selfish interest.

"I mean," continued his wife, "that as I have left you, never to return,—you may as well be separated from me legally as you are in fact. In plain terms, I recommend you to bring an action against the Duke of Marchmont for the seduction of your wife—claim heavy damages—I will take care that no defence shall be offered to the process; so that it will be neither a tedious nor a costly one; and all the favour I ask in return is that when the suit is finished you will render it the ground of *another* suit—I mean a suit for a divorce. Come now, Mr. Oxenden, is this to be an understanding between us?"

"Let it be so," answered Mr. Oxenden after a few moments' reflection. "But pray, tell me what object you have in view——"

"No matter!" interrupted the lady: "it is sufficient for you to perform the part which I enjoin: and you will find that it is a lucrative one. Go to a solicitor at once."

"I will, I will!" exclaimed the old man. "Yes, yes—for more reasons than one!"

"What do you mean?" asked his wife contemptuously. "You surely do not pretend that you are really affected by my having left you?"

"We will not discuss that point," rejoined Mr. Oxenden: "suffice it to say that I shall be too happy to carry out your suggestions to the very letter. But as I have no money wherewith to commence this suit—and as I cannot suppose that any solicitor will enter upon it without some guarantee against loss on his own side——"

"Enough!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden: "you shall have money:"—then as she opened her writing-desk and took forth a number of bank-notes, she laughed, exclaiming, "Is it not singular to use the Duke's own money in bringing an action against himself? Yet so it is! Here, Mr. Oxenden—take these notes. And now depart."

The old man did as he was bidden; and on quitting the house, he bent his way direct to an attorney of whom he had some little previous knowledge.

Mrs. Oxenden, having thus dismissed her husband, retired to her toilet-chamber, to dress for her afternoon's ride in her magnificent carriage. She opened the casket containing the splendid diamonds, and contemplated them with satisfaction and triumph. She had not as yet rung for her maid: she was alone in that dressing-room. It was elegantly appointed: every possible refinement that could be introduced into such a place, was to be observed there. A velvet curtain, with a massive gold fringe, separated it from the bath-room, which was also most luxuriously fitted up. Beyond the bath-room was a little ante-chamber, communicating with the bed-room on one side, and having a private staircase on the other,—this being for the accommodation of the lady's-maid, who could thus in a few moments attend to the summons of the bell without being forced to take the more circuitous route of the principal staircase of the house. Such at least was the original aim of the architect who planned the commodious dwelling; though in the case of Mrs. Oxenden we shall speedily find that the flight of stairs just alluded to served another purpose.

She was in the midst of her contemplation of the diamonds, when her ear caught the sound of a door gently opening and shutting; and a smile appeared upon her countenance. There was a light step traversing the bath-room: the velvet curtain was partially put aside for a moment; and an elegant young gentleman revealed himself to the eyes of the lady. But not unknown to her was he: nor was he an unwelcome intruder there. On the contrary—she at once received him in her arms; and as she caressed him with all the burning enthusiasm of her impassioned temperament, she said, "Dearest, dearest Alexis!"

"You see that I have availed myself of your permission as well as of the key," responded the visitor, as he returned those caresses.

He was perhaps one of the most beautiful youths on whom the eyes of woman ever rested lovingly. He was not above one-and-twenty, and possessed features so delicately chiselled that if he had been dressed up in feminine garb, he might easily have passed as a lovely specimen of the fair sex. His face was altogether beardless: his hair was of a rich brown, and curled naturally: his eyes were of a violet blue—his lips somewhat full, but perfectly well shaped. His figure, which was exceedingly slender, was of the most elegant symmetry: he had a sweet musical voice; and he knew how to modulate its tones to the tenderest language of love. Before continuing the thread of our narrative, we may observe that Alexis Oliver was the youngest son of a country gentleman of some property; and having renounced the profession of the bar for which he was originally intended, he had led an idle and dissipated life as a young man about town. The allowance he received from his family was exceedingly small; and having fallen in with Mrs. Oxenden, he gladly accepted her overtures, and yielded to an amour that so far from costing himself anything, appeared to promise to become the means of filling his purse. In plain terms, so far from Alexis Oliver having to keep his mistress, it was the mistress who proposed to keep him as her paramour. As in complicated machinery there are wheels within wheels, so in respect to this woman there were depravities within depravities; and she who was the wife of one man and the paid mistress of another, became the paying mistress of a third who, as we have said, served as her paramour.

"My dear Alexis," she said, "I have an excellent story to tell you:"—and she at once related how she had purchased the diamonds, thereby revenging herself on Colonel Tressilian, and at the same time giving the Duke of Marchmont another proof of the power which she was despotically resolved to wield over him.

Alexis laughed heartily—not because he really saw anything particularly amusing in the affair, but because he perceived that the lady herself wished to treat it in that agreeable light. The reader now therefore understands that he was one of those despicable creatures who for their own selfish purposes seem to forget the sex to which they belong, and practise towards the depraved women who keep them those cajoleries, wheedlings, and servile coaxings which kept women are usually wont to observe towards those who pension them.

"But are you not afraid," he inquired, "that the Duke will consider you are going a little too far? Or have you succeeded in gaining such a power over him——"

"Yes, dearest Alexis," answered Mrs. Oxenden, "I *have* gained that power over the Duke of Marchmont!"

"It is an immense power," said young Oliver musingly; and the idea stole into his mind that it must have some other source than mere infatuation on the Duke's part. "But how," he inquired, —"how, my sweetest and dearest friend——"

"You must not question me, Alexis, on that point," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden. "I have promised to make you my confidant in most things ——Indeed I love you so much that I feel disposed to give you all my confidence: but there is that one point——"

"Do not think me too curious," said the youth, though his curiosity was in reality piqued and he was resolved sooner or later to gratify it. "You are so handsome it is no wonder you have obtained this power over the Duke of Marchmont. And does he not harbour the slightest suspicion——"

"That I receive visits from you?" exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden. "Oh, no! no! And now I will tell you of a splendid plan which I have set on foot,—a plan, my dear Alexis, that when realized, will enable me to do great things for you. What should you think if you were to behold me a Duchess?"

"A Duchess?" exclaimed the young gentleman, starting with mingled astonishment and delight. "Is it possible you entertain such a hope? But have you forgotten that the Duke of Marchmont is already married?"

"I have not forgotten it," answered Mrs. Oxenden: "on the contrary, it is the principal obstacle—but still it is not invincible. No obstacle is too great for one who has the energy to grapple with it;—and that energy is mine, Alexis—you know that it is mine!"

"But you yourself are married!" cried the young gentleman with increasing bewilderment.

"Listen, Alexis—and I will give you a proof of my confidence. My husband is about to commence a process against the Duke of Marchmont: he will of course succeed—and then he will sue for a divorce from myself. In this also he will succeed; and on the day of his success I become freed from matrimonial trammels. So far so good—is it not?"

"Up to that point indeed," replied Alexis, "the project is admirable. But in respect to the Duke——"

"Listen to me again," proceeded Mrs. Oxenden. "The Duchess of Marchmont is a well-principled lady; and think you not that she would be shocked if she learnt that her husband was maintaining a mistress in a most sumptuous manner?—think you not that she would remonstrate with him—and that when she found that remonstrances failed, she would become indignant—she would feel her own position to be insupportable—she would sue for a divorce? And are there not means of goading her up to that point? are there not such things as anonymous letters, for instance?—and cannot *you*, my Alexis, become my assistant to a certain extent in working out these aims? It is for you to pen the letters which shall make the Duchess of Marchmont aware of her husband's proceedings. Let the very first convey to her the intelligence that he has expended thousands of pounds in purchasing diamonds for his mistress! Let epistle follow upon epistle; and let each one be written in terms which shall wound the pride of the Duchess to an intolerable extent! I repeat, we will goad her to desperation, so that if she have only the ordinary feelings of a woman, she will seek to separate herself from the man who treats her thus. Yes, Alexis, there must be a double divorce; and then—Oh! *then*," added Mrs. Oxenden, with a triumphant expression of countenance, "trust to me to compel—yes, I use the word *compel*—the Duke of Marchmont to conduct me to the altar!"

"These are grand schemes!" said Alexis; "and you know that I will enter into them. Only tell me how I am to act——"

"We will so arrange the details of our proceedings," said Mrs. Oxenden, "that they shall be certain to result in success. I am prepared for all their intricacies: I do not blind myself to the magnitude of the obstacles which I have to encounter. But I possess the requisite energy! Indeed, Alexis, it is a stake worth playing for! And you whom I love so well,—you who have inspired me with a passion such as never before burnt in this heart of mine——"

"Oh, my adored friend!" exclaimed the youth, clasping the infamous woman in his arms: "how rejoiced should I be to hail you as Duchess of Marchmont!"

We need not carry our report of this conversation any further: but before concluding the chapter, we will make a few observations. As already stated, Alexis Oliver was only playing a subtle and treacherous part. He in reality experienced not the slightest attachment towards Mrs. Oxenden: it suited his purpose to become her pensioned paramour—and therefore to flatter her in every sense and to fall into her views. On the other hand Mrs. Oxenden was completely infatuated with him; and the wonted strength of her character was positively absorbed in the weakness of this passion. Blinded thereby, she was ready to give him her completest confidence: she fancied that he was sincere in all he said—that he loved her with the ardour that he professed—and that it was herself, and not her purse, that was the object of his devotion.

CHAPTER CXXXVI.

THE LAWYER'S OFFICE.

THE scene shifts to a lawyer's office in Bedford Row, Holborn. The name of Mr. Coleman was upon the door-post; and that he was in a very flourishing way of business, might be judged from the fact that he kept numerous clerks—that the carriages of wealthy clients were often seen stopping at his door—that the tin-cases of his own private room contained deeds of immense value and importance, of which he was the custodian—and that his account at his banker's was always one which rendered him a valuable customer. Mr. Coleman had not as yet reached the prime of life: he was intelligent and active—and he bore an unblemished character.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that Mr. Redcliffe entered the clerks' office, and inquired if Mr. Coleman were disengaged? By the respectful manner in which the query was answered, and by the alacrity with which one of the clerks hastened to conduct Mr. Redcliffe up-stairs to the lawyer's room, it might be judged that the visitor was a client of no insignificant importance. Mr. Coleman received him with the utmost respect; and when the clerk had retired, the man of business said, "I expected you, Mr. Redcliffe. It is for to-day! And let me hope that the result will be as you have expected—and that the time is not far distant when I shall be enabled to address you by another name."

"Heaven grant that it may be so!" replied Mr. Redcliffe: and then, as an expression of the deepest anxiety, and even of intense anguish, passed over his countenance, he added, "Oh, this species of unnatural warfare which I am waging——it rends my heart!"

"And yet, my lord—Mr. Redcliffe, I mean," said the lawyer, thus suddenly correcting himself, "if the warfare itself be unnatural, it has been by the most unnatural circumstances forced upon you."

"Yes—God knows it was not of my seeking!" rejoined Mr. Redcliffe: "or at least the original causes thereof——But no matter! Let us trust to the issue. Are you confident that Armytage will come?"

"Yes—he is certain," replied Mr. Coleman. "He will come to sue for time:—perhaps he will even ask for farther advances——"

"Think you," inquired Mr. Redcliffe, his countenance assuming an expression that was half gloomy, half sad,—"think you that the web has so completely closed in around him——"

"I am convinced of it!" replied the lawyer. "I have watched his progress day and night, I might almost say—I have fathomed all his proceedings—I have penetrated all the desperate ventures in which he has embarked; and I know that his failure has been signal and complete!"

At this moment the door opened; and a clerk entered, saying, "If you please, sir, Mr. Oxenden wishes to see you."

"Mr. Oxenden?" repeated the lawyer. "Methinks I know the name—and yet I cannot recollect——"

"It is that old gentleman, sir, who lives at Brighton," said the clerk; "and against whom you were once employed by some creditor—when, if you please to recollect, sir, Mrs. Oxenden called—a fine, tall, handsome lady—and she brought a cheque, which she had received from Sir John Steward, to settle the business."

"Ah, I remember!" ejaculated Mr. Coleman. "But I cannot see Mr. Oxenden now—I am engaged——"

"Wait one instant!" cried Mr. Redcliffe, whose interest and curiosity had been awakened by the discourse. "You had better see this Mr. Oxenden: I have reasons which I will explain."

"Then ask him to walk up," said the lawyer, turning to his clerk; "and should Mr. Armytage call, bid him wait—be sure to bid him wait!"

The clerk withdrew; and Mr. Redcliffe said, "With your permission I will retire into the next room—that room where, according to our arrangement, I am to be concealed when Armytage visits you."

"By all means!" said the lawyer: and rising from his seat, he followed Mr. Redcliffe into the adjacent room. "But about this Mr. Oxenden——"

"His wife," interrupted Redcliffe, "is now the mistress of him whose name I can never breathe unless to associate it with some fresh deed of crime or profligacy. My God! alas that it should be so! I know much of these Oxendens—I mean by repute——or rather, I should say, by information which I have received from the lips of Christian, who was at the house of that very Sir John Steward at Ramsgate——"

Here Mr. Redcliffe's observations were cut short by the opening of the door of the adjacent room. Mr. Coleman accordingly left him in his place of concealment, and hastened to receive Mr. Oxenden.

"There are particular circumstances, sir," began Mr. Oxenden, as he took the seat which was offered him, "that render it necessary for me to engage the assistance of some eminent and respectable solicitor. I have no lawyer of my own; and you indeed are the only professional gentleman in London with whom I have any acquaintance. Will you act for me?"

"If you will explain, Mr. Oxenden, the circumstances to which you allude," said Mr. Coleman, "I shall be enabled to give you an answer."

"My wife has been taken from me," resumed the old gentleman: "she has been seduced from my arms by one who is very highly placed! I mean the Duke of Marchmont. I must punish the seducer—and I must procure an eternal separation from the woman who has dishonoured me. This is the reason that I require professional assistance; and whatsoever amount you may demand in advance, I am ready to pay it."

"You mean, Mr. Oxenden," said the lawyer, inquiringly, "that you purpose to bring an action for damages against the Duke of Marchmont—and that if you be successful therein, you will carry the case up to the House of Lords and procure a divorce?"

"That is my meaning—those are my objects," was the reply. "I will never rest until I have punished that villanous seducer of my wife."

"And the evidence which you have to bring forward?" asked Mr. Coleman.

"What evidence can be better than that the depraved woman is living under the protection of the Duke of Marchmont? He has taken a house for her—he has supplied her with equipages—with horses and servants—he visits her frequently——"

"If all this can be proved, it is sufficient," interrupted Mr. Coleman. "I will make notes of the information you now give me—I will institute inquiries—and if you will favour me with another call in a day or two, I shall be better enabled to give you my opinion upon the case."

Mr. Oxenden accordingly took his departure; and immediately afterwards Mr. Armytage was announced. Though Zoe's father was not above fifty-two years of age, yet he looked older; for care and anxiety had traced upon his countenance the marks of their ravages. His hair was completely grey: there were deep lines upon his forehead; and that expression of cold worldly-minded calculation which his features had been wont to wear, had become subdued—or we should perhaps say had changed into one of settled wretchedness. He entered the office with the mingled nervousness and humility of a man who was very far from being in a condition to pay a large sum of money—but rather with the demeanour of one who, as Mr. Coleman had expected, came to sue for grace, leniency, and forbearance. The lawyer did not, however suffer his countenance to betray that he thus anticipated what Armytage's financial position might really be: but with all civility he motioned him to a seat; and then resuming his own place at the desk, began untying the red tape which held together a number of deeds.

"Well, Mr. Armytage," said Coleman, "I presume from your punctuality that you are here to settle the business according to agreement. And it is very fortunate, inasmuch as my client——"

"Your client wants the money?" said Armytage, with feverish excitement. "Then it *is* a client who has advanced it? It is not yourself?"

"I indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Coleman. "I can assure you that the legal profession now-a-days is not quite so flourishing as to enable one who practises it, to advance fifty thousand pounds——"

"Good heavens! what am I to do?" moaned the wretched Armytage, clasping his hands in despair.

"Am I to understand," inquired Mr. Coleman, "that you have come unprepared with a cheque for this amount—an amount which you so solemnly undertook to pay, and for which you gave me this warraut of attorney, exercising full power over your person as well as your property——"

"Good God! you would not take my person? you would not plunge me into a gaol?" cried Armytage, looking as if frenzy had suddenly seized upon him.

"I have already informed you," responded Mr. Coleman, "that it is not my money which you have had; it is that of a client. I am not therefore acting for myself—but for another; and I

must obey the instructions which that other has given me."

"But you can make a farther advance? or *he* can make another advance?" said Armytage, grasping as it were with the awfullest feelings of suspense. "If you do not, it is ruin!—utter and complete ruin for me——aye, and not only ruin for myself—but likewise for others! And I who have such opportunities! There is at this moment a project which, if entered into, would be certain to realize hundreds and thousands. Oh, you must—you must afford me this opportunity of getting back my lost fortune—of redeeming my past adversities! Oh, dear kind sir! I beseech, I beseech you to aid me!"

There was a wild horror in the look and manner of Armytage—a species of frenzied terror lest a negative response should issue from the attorney's lips. His countenance was ghastly pale: he leant forward as he sat,—his gaze fixed with a sort of devouring avidity upon Coleman's countenance. The solicitor, who was a humane man, felt his heart touched by the spectacle; and Redcliffe, who was in the next room, was likewise moved as he listened to the tone of anguished entreaty in which the wretched being spoke. But still neither would yield upon the subject: the course which was being adopted arose from a paramount necessity.

"I tell you, sir," continued Armytage, "that it is not merely ruin for one—it is ruin for more! My daughter—my beloved daughter—the amiable and accomplished Zoe, for whom I have toiled so hard—for whose sake I strove to heap up riches,—*she* too will be ruined!—*she* will be reduced to penury itself,—she who has never known what it is to want! And then her husband—my son-in-law—Lord Octavian——Oh, what a dreadful blow for him! No, no! it is impossible!—you could not do me so much injury! You would not——you are a man of feeling——"

"Mr. Armytage," inquired Coleman, "how much money do you possess?"

"Not a hundred pounds in the whole world!" almost shrieked forth the wretched man. "I ought to have made hundreds of thousands! I ought to be rich! Oh, I ought to have amassed treasures! But a hideous fatality has hung over me—everything has gone wrong! I throw myself upon your mercy!"

"Mr. Armytage," said Coleman, rising from his seat, and leaning against the mantel with a certain resoluteness of air, "you borrowed this money for a stated time—the instructions of my client are positive—and however much I may deplore the necessity of using harshness, yet circumstances leave me no alternative."

"And what—what would you do?" asked the miserable man, bending forward in his chair, and looking up with an expression of haggard, ghastly appeal into the lawyer's countenance.

"Mr. Armytage," responded Coleman, "I have already told you that my client's instructions are of the most positive character. And when I tell you that it is no secret to us that you are otherwise indebted—that you have raised twenty thousand pounds by means of bills——"

"Yes—bills!" gasped Armytage: and more hideously haggard, if possible, became his countenance. "Those bills—those bills! Ruin—disgrace—infamy!" he muttered to himself, with a certain vacancy, as if reason were abandoning him.

"And these bills," continued Mr. Coleman, "have all fallen into my hands—or rather the hands of that same client to whom you were already so largely indebted."

"But they are not as yet due!" cried Armytage.

"No: but they will be due in a few days," rejoined Coleman; "and how will you pay them? Upwards of seventy thousand pounds do you now owe to this client of mine; and you have admitted your almost total want of resources. Permit me to ask one question. I believe you possess the friendship of the Duke of Marchmont. Think you that he will come forward with so large a sum to extricate you from your difficulties?"

"What if he were to advance a part?" ejaculated Armytage eagerly. "Say twenty thousand? I dare not beseech him for more!"

"So far as my client is concerned," responded Coleman, "he insists upon being paid everything to the uttermost farthing. Or else——"

"Or else what?" said Armytage quickly. "Oh, have mercy! Think of my poor daughter! She has been ill—she has been in France for her health——and, Oh! if she were to see her father in prison, it would kill her! I beseech you to have mercy."

"Mr. Armytage," resumed the lawyer, "there is the warrant of attorney; and if you fulfil not your engagement, it must be immediately acted upon. Unfortunately in these circumstances all private feelings are lost sight of: my duty towards my client prevents me from paying that regard to this appeal which you make on your daughter's behalf——"

"But who is this client of your's?" exclaimed Armytage, driven almost to despair. "Surely he cannot be so hard a man?—surely he cannot wish to plunge three of his fellow-creatures into a ruin for which there will be no redemption? Give me time, even if you will not assist me with a further loan! But to put the bailiffs into my house—to seize upon my person——Oh, the disgrace! And then, when the news reach my poor Zoe——"

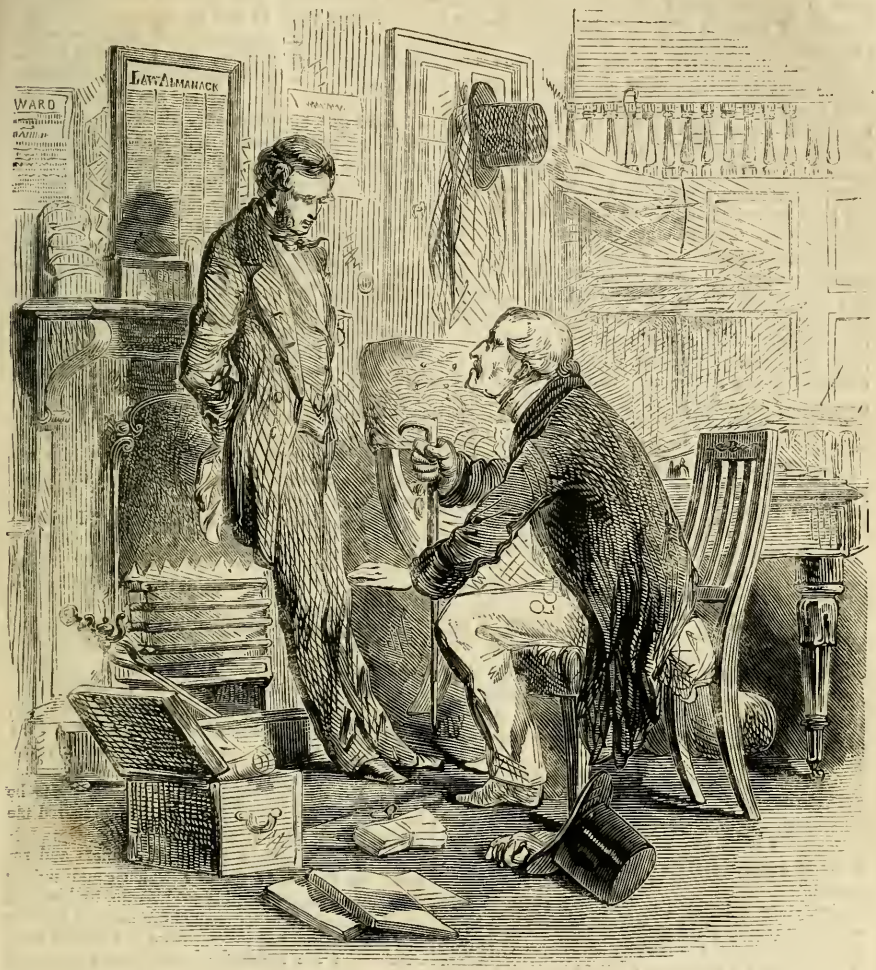
"You would make very great sacrifices, Mr. Armytage," said the lawyer, "in order to avoid this catastrophe?"

"Sacrifice!" ejaculated Armytage. "Tell me what sacrifice you demand? Tell me what I can do——"

"There *is* something, Mr. Armytage," said Coleman,—"yes, there is something—but you little suspect to what I allude——yet there is something, I repeat——"

"My God! keep me not in suspense!" cried the miserable creature imploringly: "but tell me, *is* there a means of saving myself?"

"There is a means," answered the lawyer: "it is the only alternative to save you from a debtor's prison. I will even go farther; and wild though my words may seem, yet they are nevertheless fraught with truth. The warrant of attorney, and the bills which are coming due, may all be torn up before your face and tossed into the fire: the lost fortune of your daughter may be replaced—and ruin may be averted from yourself——if—if," repeated Coleman, with a solemnly significant look,—"if you——"



"Oh, for heaven's sake speak!" cried Armytage, now almost wild with mingled joy and suspense. "To avert the blow from Zoe——"

He stopped suddenly short; and overpowered by his feelings, burst into tears.

"Yes," continued Mr. Coleman, after a brief pause, during which these tears flowed freely from the eyes of Armytage,—"you can save yourself! But I tell you that the sacrifice you may have to make is immense, inasmuch as it involves the complete unbosoming of every secret which your heart has harboured."

"What mean you?" gasped he to whom these words were addressed.

"I am speaking intelligibly," proceeded the lawyer. "Look down into the depths of your soul, and see if there be nothing there which you have hitherto locked up in the profoundest cavern where the most stupendous secrets could possibly be retained. Choose whether you will have that mighty secret dragged into the light of day—or whether you will dare a debtor's prison?"

"I do not understand you," said Armytage—and yet it was with a look and in a tone which conveyed the impression that he was as it were appalled by the manner in which he had just been addressed.

"I will now deal more frankly with you," proceeded Mr. Coleman. "The whole tenour of my connexion with you from the very first instant that I sought you out, has had one object in view—and only one object! I knew that you were in difficulties; and therefore it was not in a blind confidence that I advanced you my client's money. No—it was to get you into our power; and for *this* reason did I likewise find out where you had bills circulating—for *this* reason was money given for those bills, that they might get into our hands and paralyse you all the more completely when the day of reckoning should come. The web has

enmeshed you—it has closed in around you; and there is but one means for your emancipation. Everything depends now upon yourself. I offer to annihilate your debts by the destruction of bonds and documents; I offer likewise on my client's part to restore your daughter's fortune with which you have made away; and more than that, I will guarantee to yourself a certain sum of money—a reasonable sum, to the amount of a few thousand pounds,—so that if you consider you have positively and veritably a chance of redeeming your broken fortunes, the opportunity will be afforded you. On the other hand the fullest and completest revelation in respect to certain past incidents whereof I have no doubt that you possess a knowledge,—*this* is the condition on which alone so much will be done for you. Need I speak more plainly? Your countenance," added Coleman impressively, "proves beyond a matter of doubt that you labour not under the slightest uncertainty as to the meaning of my words."

"But is this a delusion? am I under the influence of a waking dream? dare I believe the language which meets my ears?"—and Armytage, pressing his hands to his throbbing brows, appeared to feel as if this would steady his reeling brain.

"You may believe everything you hear," responded Mr. Coleman: "have I not already told you that all has been a matter of calculation? You remember that I sought you out—I forced money upon you—it was not you who first addressed yourself to me——"

"True! true!" ejaculated Armytage: then suddenly starting up, he fixed his eyes keenly upon the lawyer, saying, "But if I were to tell you everything, would any harm redound upon my own head?"

"I can scarcely think, Mr. Armytage," replied Mr. Coleman, "that you yourself have a crime wherewith you have to reproach your conscience ——unless it be the concealment of your knowledge of another's crime: but that is comparatively venial."

Armytage reflected: a powerful struggle was evidently taking place within his breast; and turning again towards the lawyer, he said, "It is true I could make a revelation: but to what use would it be turned?"

"You must not question me too far," answered Coleman: then assuming a solemn air, he added in a corresponding tone, "The day is near at hand, Mr. Armytage, when the justice of heaven will assert itself, and when all mysteries shall be cleared up. Think you that if I were not in possession of a certain clue I should be speaking as I am now addressing you? Think you that so much trouble would have been taken and so much money ventured, if there were not in the first instance a degree of certainty as to the result which was to be produced? Look at your position! The abyss of ruin yawns to receive you—whereas on the other hand you may be restored to the enjoyment of affluence, and all your adversity may be turned into prosperity!"

"My debts will be forgiven me?" said Armytage: "my daughter's money which I have lost, will be restored to me——"

"All!—everything!" replied Mr. Coleman. "And now——"

At this moment the door was thrown open; and a clerk announced, "The Duke of Marchmont."

The lawyer started; and an expression of mingled wonderment and annoyance passed over his countenance. He was astonished that this nobleman should have so suddenly made his appearance at such a crisis; and he was vexed because he fancied that his interview with Armytage might now take a turn different from that which he had anticipated. Armytage himself likewise started: he became exceedingly agitated: he looked first at Mr. Coleman and then at the Duke, as if hardly knowing whether to think that the appearance of his Grace was an unexpected or pre-arranged event. But his uncertainty on this point was speedily dispelled on observing the look of surprise with which the Duke of Marchmont regarded him.

"What, Armytage! you here?" exclaimed the Duke. "Ah! by the bye, now I recollect, you have pecuniary affairs with Mr. Coleman? I hope they are progressing satisfactorily?—Mr. Coleman, perhaps I ought to beg your pardon for this intrusion: your clerk told me that you had some one with you—but the instant I gave him my card, he expressed his conviction you would see me without delay."

"Yes, my lord," said the attorney, "I will attend to your Grace at once. Mr. Armytage, have the kindness to step into another room. My clerk will show you thither. We will finish our business presently."

The clerk, who had lingered at the door, led Mr. Armytage across the landing to another room; and the Duke of Marchmont remained alone with the solicitor—at least so far alone as they could be said to be, considering that Mr. Redcliffe was in an adjoining apartment and in a position to overhear everything that took place. Mr. Coleman requested the Duke of Marchmont to be seated: and then said, "May I beg to be informed of the business which has procured me the honour of your Grace's visit?"

There was a certain degree of coldness and reserve in Coleman's manner which could not be otherwise than perceptible to one who, by his rank and position, might naturally have awaited nothing but the profoundest respect from the man of business. But not appearing to notice the somewhat glacial distance of the lawyer's demeanour, the Duke said, "I do not think, Mr. Coleman, that I shall take up your time many minutes; for I have only a simple question to put—and doubtless your answer will be as concisely given."

"Proceed, my lord," said the solicitor: and as he seated himself at his desk, he awaited with cold and grave attention whatsoever was to follow.

"It has come to my knowledge," continued the Duke of Marchmont, "that you have made inquiries concerning a certain Madame Angelique three or four times lately; and to tell you the truth, she is somewhat alarmed. Now, I need not inform you, Mr. Coleman, that some of us mortals are frail enough—and I will frankly admit that I, being one of these fallible ones, frequented the establishment which Madame Angelique used to keep. Happening to call upon her to-day—just to see how she was getting on in the villa to which she has retired—I found her overwhelmed with alarm——"

"I can assure your Grace," answered Mr. Coleman, "I have recently made no inquiries relative to Madame Angelique. There was a period when I certainly intended to prosecute her for keeping a house of infamy: but when she abandoned that iniquitous profession and retired to some suburb of the metropolis——"

"I understand, Mr. Coleman!" ejaculated the Duke: "you were satisfied? the establishment was broken up, and that was all which you required? Then I must have been deceived: or rather Madame Angelique herself has been misled upon the point. But she certainly labours under the apprehension that you still have your eye upon her; and what is more, that you entertain the intention of renewing hostile proceedings. Now, between you and me, Mr. Coleman, if this be really the case, I should be very happy to do anything I can for Madame Angelique—not merely for old acquaintance' sake——"

"My lord," interrupted the attorney coolly, "pardon me for expressing my surprise at the circumstance of such phrases of sympathy and friendship dropping from your lips in reference to such a woman."

"I know very well," responded the Duke, drawing himself up haughtily for a moment, "that it may appear strange to any one who is exceedingly particular. But," he added, instantaneously unbending and assuming an urbane demeanour once more; "I hope you will treat the matter as between men of the world. You can very well understand that if any proceedings were instituted against Madame Angelique, she might possibly give publicity to the names of some of her principal patrons; and as this would seriously affect the reputation of many individuals highly placed, I venture to express a hope that for their sake——"

"One word is sufficient, my lord," interrupted Mr. Coleman; "and I hesitate not to declare that the topic is fraught with infinite disgust for me. I am at present taking no legal proceedings against Madame Angelique: but let me tell your Grace, that if I were doing so, the chance of involving all the titled names in the kingdom would have no weight with me!"

"Setting aside the species of reproof conveyed in your words," said Marchmont for an instant biting his lip, "and which may be more consistent with morality than courtesy, I thank you for the assurance you have given me. I wish you good afternoon, Mr. Coleman:"—and the Duke was walking towards the door, when, as if suddenly struck by a recollection, he ejaculated, "Ah! by the bye, what about Armytage? I know him well: he is a worthy man—but foolishly speculative; and he has always got his brain full of ideas about making a fortune. I hope that his affaira——"

"My lord," interrupted Coleman, with a glacial reserve, "I never speak to one person unnecessarily of the affairs of another——"

Again the Duke of Marchmont bit his lip: he hesitated, and lingered as if about to say something more: but thinking better of it, he bowed with a haughty coldness and quitted the room. The opposite door on the landing was half open; and Armytage, appearing upon the threshold, said in an agitated manner, "My lord, one word with you, if you please?"

It was precisely this meeting which Mr. Coleman was anxious to prevent; and he had accordingly followed the Duke forth upon the landing. He heard that hastily expressed desire on the part of Armytage; and he stopped short, uncertain how to act.

"Eh? a word with me?" exclaimed the Duke, affecting an easy, off-hand, indifferent manner, as he perceived that Mr. Coleman was immediately behind him. "Where can we converse?"

"I have no doubt," replied Armytage, "that Mr. Coleman will permit us the use of this room for a few instants——"

"Certainly," said the lawyer: for he felt that it would be most churlish—as it indeed would have been, to all outward appearance—for him to refuse so simple a request.

He accordingly bowed, and returned to his own private office: while the Duke of Marchmont entered that room on the threshold of which Mr. Armytage had made his appearance.

"What is the matter, Travers——Armytage, I mean?" demanded the Duke, closing the door after him. "You look pale—agitated—ill: something has excited you terribly! But I suppose I can guess what it is? All those grand schemes of your's, of which you spoke to me, and in which so much of the money I lent you has been locked up——"

"My lord, listen!" interrupted Armytage: "for it is indeed most serious!"

"This is what I feared," said the Duke, with an air of such bitter vexation that it almost amounted to anguish. "You are again pressed for money: but I hope, in heaven's name, you do not expect any more at my hands!—for what with an extravagant mistress, and such drains as you have lately made upon my purse, Travers, it would ruin the greatest fortune!"

These last words were not exactly uttered with an intention of being overheard by Armytage; but were rather spoken in a musing manner to the Duke's ownself—while he took rapid and short walks to and fro in the room. Nevertheless, Zoe's father *did* hear those words: but he seemed to take little heed of them.

"My lord," he resumed, "it is indeed most serious—and I beseech you to listen to me! Do not interrupt—every instant of delay is only fraught with additional anguish towards myself, and with additional suspense for your Grace; because what I have to say, regards your lordship as much as it does me."

"Travers!" ejaculated Marchmont, darting a peculiarly piercing look upon the speculator.

"Three times has your lordship addressed me by that name within the last five minutes," rejoined Armytage; "and let me tell you that it is ominous! For besides ourselves, it would seem as if there is some one else beneath this roof who knows that I once bore that name."

"And what of that?" asked the Duke quickly, but at the same time with an expression of fear in his looks which was in contradiction with the seeming hardihood of his words. "There are several persons in the world who know that you once bore that name. But there is no harm——"

"Ah, my lord! why do you not listen?" exclaimed Armytage impatiently. "You yourself see that there *is* some harm pending: and yet do

you thus endeavour to stave off the instant when you must hear the truth. Listen, I say, my lord! You see before you a man who is placed in the most difficult and painful of positions. I am ruined—fifty thousand pounds do I owe this lawyer—or, more properly speaking, his client; twenty thousand pounds of bills which I have put in circulation —— and, my God, *such* bills!—will be due in a few days: these are also in this lawyer's hands——Zoe's fortune made away with——"

"Well, well!" ejaculated the Duke, now evidently fevered with the intensest and most painful curiosity. "But how does all this——"

"How does it regard your Grace?" exclaimed Armytage bitterly.

"In a direct manner, I mean?" interjected Marchmont. "Of course through friendship for you——"

"My lord, if you would but listen!" exclaimed Armytage, with renewed impatience. "I have shown you how on the one side I stand upon the very verge of ruin: I may now tell you how on the other I have received offers of a most astounding—a most incredible nature——and yet all true, all true! I may be rich once more: I may be released from these fearful liabilities—the fortune of my daughter, which I have dissipated, may be replaced—and in addition to all this, a large sum may be at my disposal,—all on *one* condition—yes, *one* condition, my lord——"

"And that condition?" ejaculated Marchmont, smitten with the conviction that all to which he was listening must indeed more or less regard himself.

"Your Grace may believe me or not, as you think fit," resumed Armytage: "but I swear unto you that no syllable suggestive of aught to your prejudice went forth from my lips: no word savouring of betrayal, did I utter. No, by heaven: not a syllable—not a word! And yet the proposition was made—a proposition to the effect that if I would only reveal something——Need I, my lord, say more?"

"In the name of God," gasped the Duke, white as a sheet, and staggering as if stricken a blow, "what—what——"

But he could not complete the sentence: he could not complete the query which he endeavoured to frame with his ashy quivering lips.

"For years has your Grace's secret been kept," resumed Armytage; "and for countless reasons would I most sincerely desire to keep it inviolate unto the end! But the temptation to betray it is immense! With me everything is now at stake: circumstances render me intensely selfish; and it is for your Grace to decide whether I am to owe the resuscitation of my fortunes to yourself, or to that lawyer in the other room?"

Armytage had spoken with a mingled nervousness and resoluteness; and the Duke of Marchmont, sinking upon a chair, gasped for breath. His eyes stared wildly: his countenance became fearful to look upon in its indescribable ghastliness. The punishment of pandemonium was gnawing at the heart within—rending the soul with ineffable excruciations, and reflecting its direst agonies upon the features themselves.

"Travers," said the Duke, in a low hollow voice, as he rose from his seat and approached Armytage, "you could not do this!"

"My lord," was the response, "I repeat that I have grown intensely selfish: I can now think of no one but of myself and of my daughter. Seventy thousand pounds do I owe to this lawyer—or rather to his client; and, Oh, my lord! you know not how absolutely necessary it is that the bills which form a portion of that debt should be taken up before they are due!"

"But, my God, Travers!" asked the Duke, with the most feverish and frightful suspense, "what has this Coleman been saying to you? What does he know? what does he suspect? There must have been some clue——"

"My lord," replied Armytage, "I swear that I know nothing as to the origin of all that has ere now taken place. I myself was astounded! Think you that I would have wilfully dropped a word——"

"No, no, Travers!" exclaimed Marchmont.

"Pray cease from calling me by that name! It sounds ominous, my lord—I tell you that it sounds ominous! The raven does not croak forth its own doom——"

"Enough, Armytage!" interrupted Marchmont: "our very language is taking a tone which is indescribably horrible! But tell me—tell me—I adjure you, tell me—nay, I command you," continued the Duke, almost maddened with the hideous thoughts that were agitating in his brain, so that he scarcely knew what he said: "is not all this some device on your part—some understanding with that lawyer for the purpose of drawing me into the settlement of your debts? Oh! if it be, I will forgive you—I will forgive you—I will come forward to assist you! Only relieve my mind—tell me that nothing really is known—that nothing is suspected,—tell me this, I entreat you, Armytage—give me that assurance, my dear friend—and I will pardon the little device—I will attribute it to the desperation of your circumstanees——Oh! set my mind at ease, I entreat and implore!"

"My lord," responded Armytage, "I am *not* deceiving you! It is utter folly on your part to blind yourself to the perils which environ you, and to seek to take refuge in an idea which your own good sense tells you is unfounded."

The Duke was however catching at any straw which floated past; and like all men in desperate circumstances, he was endeavouring to reason against his own convictions. No pen can describe the degree of wretchedness which he experienced—the forlorn desolate state of abject misery to which his mind was reduced. Ghastly as his countenance was, it was still a tablet as imperfect to reflect all that was blighting, searing, scathing, and scorching his heart within, as language itself is powerless to convey the extent of that deep internal agony.

"For heaven's sake make haste, my lord! How is it to be?" exclaimed Armytage. "You know the worst—and it is for you to decide. Desperate as my own circumstances are, it is to me but a matter of indifference from which quarter help may come—whether from yourself or from that attorney in the other room. There is however one thing which you should bear in mind. It is quite evident that whatsoever Mr. Coleman may suspect, he is very far from having any certitude upon the point: it is clear that he must be utterly without proofs—or else he would not be prepared on behalf

of his client to make such tremendous sacrifices in order to elicit revelations from my lips."

"True!" ejaculated the Duke of Marchmont, clutching with a species of feverish joy at this hope. "But that client—who is he?"

"I know not, my lord," rejoined Armytage: "his name has never been mentioned to me; nor to my knowledge have I ever seen him. But no matter! If the lawyer remain in ignorance, the client must be equally ignorant——"

"And you, Armytage," said the Duke,—"will *you* maintain the seal of secrecy upon your lips if I make this enormous sacrifice on your behalf?"

"For how many years, my lord, have I already kept that secret?" asked the speculator: "and think you it is a secret which I should willingly reveal? Think you, in a word, it would please me to proclaim to the world that I have so long rendered myself an accomplice, as it were—yes, an accomplice by my very silence——"

"Enough, Armytage!" ejaculated the Duke of Marchmont. "I will do all that is needful. Whatsoever they propose——"

"The items may soon be summed up," said Armytage. "Seventy thousand pounds to be paid to this lawyer—Zoe's lost fortune of sixty thousand to be replaced—that makes a hundred and thirty thousand. Then say twenty thousand for myself——"

"A hundred and fifty thousand pounds!" exclaimed the Duke: "the sacrifice is immense! Nevertheless, it shall be accomplished. Let us compose ourselves—let us calm our feelings, if possible!"

Marchmont sat down, rested his elbows on his knees, and buried his face in his hands. He was exerting all his power to tranquillize his mind sufficiently to meet the lawyer and terminate the business. Armytage had far less difficulty in composing his own countenance: for there was now joy in his heart—he was to be rescued from all his embarrassments, and without the dreaded alternative of having to make any revelation whatsoever.

"Now let us rejoin the lawyer," said the Duke of Marchmont, at length rising from his seat: but as he withdrew his hands from his countenance, Armytage perceived that the traces of a recent convulsing agony remained thereupon.

They issued forth together from the room; and Armytage tapped at the door of Mr. Coleman's private apartment opposite. This gentleman at once opened that door; and the two passed in.

"Mr. Coleman," said the Duke of Marchmont, with an almost preternatural exertion to maintain his composure, "my friend Mr. Armytage has consulted me in respect to his affairs: he has enumerated all his liabilities—and I feel inclined to assist him. Of course you yourself will rejoice that the matter is to be thus terminated in a way which will restore your client all the money he has advanced."

"Mr. Armytage is of course the best judge of his own affairs, my lord," replied Mr. Coleman, with a true professional coldness and gravity, though inwardly he was supremely annoyed at the turn that circumstances were thus taking.

"I believe, Mr. Coleman," proceeded the Duke of Marchmont, "that your own demand upon Mr. Armytage is some seventy thousand pounds: but if you will give me the precise amount, I will at once write you a cheque, and you can hand over to Mr. Armytage the securities which you hold."

The lawyer was of course utterly unable to offer any objection to this proceeding; and adding up the amounts, together with the interest and expenses, he passed the paper specifying the total to the Duke of Marchmont. His Grace glanced quickly at the sum; and painfully anxious to have the business terminated, he took a slip of paper to write the cheque. While he was thus engaged, a clerk entered and handed a letter to Mr. Coleman. Neither the Duke nor Armytage imagined for a moment that this letter had any reference to the present proceedings; and as the former continued to write, the latter went on revolving the ideas that were in his mind. The cheque was completed; and then Armytage, stooping over Marchmont's shoulder, whispered in his ear, "At the same time your Grace must give me the draft for the eighty thousand that remains to be paid; so that everything may be now settled at once."

"And why not presently, or to-morrow?" asked the Duke, likewise speaking in a whisper, but hurriedly and even angrily.

"Because, I repeat, everything must be settled at once," returned Armytage with a resolute air. "The alternatives are before you: you have chosen your own course——"

"Well, be it so," interrupted the Duke: and taking another slip of paper, he began to write the second cheque.

Meanwhile Mr. Coleman had read the letter which the clerk had placed in his hand; and a gleam of satisfaction mingled with the expression of astonishment which appeared upon his countenance. The Duke and Armytage were too much absorbed by what was then taking place between them, to notice the effect produced on the attorney by the letter he had received: and he himself for a few instants appeared irresolute how to act. That indecision was however of only transient duration; and suddenly laying his hand upon the shoulder of Armytage, the lawyer exclaimed, "Stop! the matter cannot be settled thus!"

"What," cried the Duke of Marchmont, springing up in terror to his feet; "what mean you?"

"I mean," responded Mr. Coleman, fixing his eyes upon Armytage, although answering the question put to him by the Duke,—"I mean that the bills which I hold in my possession, are forgeries—and you, Mr. Armytage, have been guilty of a felon's crime!"

It was a cry of anguish which rang from the lips of Armytage—at the same time that an ejaculation of dismay burst from the Duke of Marchmont, as the frightful conviction flashed to his mind that the ruined speculator was now completely in the power of the attorney and his unknown client.

At the same moment hasty footsteps were heard ascending the stairs: the door was burst open—and three other persons appeared upon the scene.

CHAPTER CXXXVII.

THE TREACHEROUS HINDOO WOMAN.

When last we spoke of the ayah Sagoonah, it was to describe her lying in her couch at Queen Indora's villa, and making unconscious revelations respecting the past. During the night of the day which followed, a gleam of intelligence came back into Sagoonah's mind: it faded away—presently it returned—it subsided again—and then it came back with increasing power. She was altogether recovering her consciousness.

Long before morning dawned on that night of which we are speaking, Sagoonah was in complete possession of her mental faculties; and though she uttered not a word, she was now aware of her position and of the frightful calamity which had befallen her. Collecting her ideas, she settled them upon that memorable evening when disguised in the apparel of her mistress, and laden also with the treasure plundered from the Queen, she had intended to escape from the villa, but only to be stricken down by an assassin's dagger!

By the bedside she perceived an elderly woman whom she had no difficulty in recognising as a nurse; and presently the Queen herself entered the chamber. Sagoonah closed her eyes; and appeared to be sleeping profoundly. The nurse quitted the room for some purpose: Indora bent over the ayah; and entertaining not the slightest suspicion that the treacherous Hindoo was now in possession of her reasoning faculties, her Majesty gave audible expression to the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind.

"O Sagoonah, Sagoonah!" she murmured; "how could you have been so wicked—you whom I loved and trusted?"

No change upon the ayah's countenance denoted that she heard or comprehended what was thus being said; and Indora, wiping away the tears which had trickled down her cheeks, retired to an ottoman at a little distance from the couch; and seating herself there, she fell into a profound reverie. Shortly afterwards Christina Ashton entered the chamber; and having bent over the ayah, whom she believed to be still steeped in unconsciousness, she gazed on her countenance for a few moments. Then, heaving a profound sigh, Christina turned towards the Queen; and said in a half-hushed voice, "Think you, dear lady, that Sagoonah will ever recover?"

"Yes — she will recover," responded Indora; "she is evidently much better. This much I can tell by her countenance. But perhaps, my dear Christina, it were better for her own sake that she should *never* recover!—for if she have any good feeling left, the remainder of her life must be spent amidst the agonies of remorse."

"Oh, yes, dear lady!" continued Christina; "so much wickedness is incomprehensible! There was such refinement in it that one is almost justified in fancying that the spirit of a fiend must have inspired her for the time! The snake——O heavens! I shudder when I think of it!"

"And well may you shudder, dear Christina," rejoined the Queen; "for it was terrible! Even while the reason of that wretched girl had lost its guiding power, yet was conscience at work, and in her dreams did she make those revelations which have conveyed to our knowledge all the wickedness of her conduct. But she will recover, Christina——"

"And it is you, lady," answered our heroine, "who will have saved the life of her who sought to take your own!"

"Yes—she will recover," continued the Queen, in a musing manner, yet speaking audibly; "and she will have leisure for repentance, if her heart be susceptible thereof!"

"Have you decided, dear lady," asked Christina, "upon the course which you intend hereafter to adopt with regard to her?"

"You know, Christina," replied Indora, "that it is my hope and expectation to be in a short time enabled to return to my kingdom; and if no fresh circumstances transpire to alter my plan, I shall take Sagoonah with me. But never again can I give her my confidence—much less restore her the love which, all menial though she were, I was wont to bear towards her! The remainder of her life must be passed in strictest seclusion at Inderabad. If she be truly penitent she will not grow impatient of that compulsory retirement to which it is my purpose to consign her: but if, on the other hand, her soul shall continue to cherish rancorous thoughts, it will be all the more necessary that she should be deprived of the power of doing mischief."

"Oh! let us hope that she will be penitent!" said Christina; "let us hope it, chiefly for her own sake!"

Here the conversation terminated: but not one single syllable thereof had been lost to Sagoonah. She now comprehended that all her iniquity was known; and that even the most terrific episode of her criminal proceedings—namely, that of the cobra di capello—had ceased to be a mystery. She saw too that an eternal imprisonment in her own native land was to be her doom—unless indeed she herself should be enabled to frustrate the designs of the Queen. But that this imprisonment was intended to be associated with the most lenient circumstances, Sagoonah comprehended, not merely from the way in which her Majesty spoke, but likewise from her knowledge of that royal lady's disposition. Nevertheless, the thought of such compulsory seclusion was sufficient to fill the soul of the ayah with dread and consternation.

We have seen how conscience had been actively at work when reason's governing power was absent; but now that the intellect had recovered its balance, and that the mental faculties had resumed their empire once again, the evil passions of the ayah enabled her to stifle all those reproaches of the monitor within her bosom. Her crimes were known; and never again could she look her mistress in the face! Besides, to become a prisoner for the rest of her days—this was intolerable! And to know that Indora would enjoy happiness in the love of Clement Redcliffe—this likewise was more than the jealous Sagoonah could possibly make up her mind to contemplate! She loathed the very idea of the kindness which she must have been experiencing at the Queen's hands since the evening when the dagger of the assassin struck her down;—and thus her soul was in every sense filled with gall and bitterness. Penitence and re-

morse!—*these* were incompatible with such a disposition as Sagoonah's!

Her mind was made up how to act. At present she felt herself too weak and feeble to move from her couch: but she was resolved to take the earliest opportunity, not merely to escape from the villa, but likewise to carry out all her original plans of vengeance. In the meanwhile it was necessary to dissemble. She must give no sign of consciousness—or else she would be questioned by the Queen: perhaps she would be reproached?—at all events it suited her purpose in every way to simulate a prolonged unconsciousness of everything that was passing around her.

Thus several days elapsed; and during this period Sagoonah so well played her part, that no one who entered her chamber entertained the remotest suspicion how vividly the light of reason had flamed up again. It was as if a lamp were burning within a tomb which the unsuspicious passer-by conceived to be inwardly plunged into obscurity. Sagoonah felt her strength rapidly increasing; and she soon saw that the moment was approaching when she must put into execution her project of escape. The medical attendant declared that physically she was past all danger; but he expressed to the Queen and Christina his apprehension that her reason was gone for ever—this being the only hypothesis to account for that seeming absence of consciousness which the wily and treacherous Sagoonah so effectually simulated. And she heard the observations which were thus made by the side of her couch; and never once did a muscle of her face move suspiciously—never once did a rush of blood to her cheeks betray her knowledge of what was thus passing around her. Surgeon, Queen, Christina, nurse,—all were deceived!—all imagined that Sagoonah remained in utter ignorance of her position! They knew not that within that apparently unconscious form the darkest passions were agitating—the deepest designs were being formed—and the vitality of the intellect had sprung up with an unimpaired power.

Days passed, as we have said, since her return to consciousness; and Sagoonah was now watching an opportunity of escape. It failed not to present itself. One morning after breakfast, when both the Queen and Christina were in the Hindoo woman's chamber, the following brief dialogue took place.

"It is, my purpose, dear Christina," said the Queen, "to pay the promised visit this forenoon to Miss Isabella Vincent. You know that I assured your brother I would take the earliest opportunity to form that young lady's acquaintance; and indeed, I begin to feel the want of a little change of air and temporary recreation, no matter how brief!"

"It is exceedingly kind of you, dear lady," answered Christina, "to think of one in whom my brother is so much interested; and I am rejoiced that you are about to seek some little recreation. I will remain with Sagoonah during your ladyship's absence. Not for a single moment will I leave the chamber, nor abandon her to the sole care of the nurse."

"It is not so necessary, my dear Christina," replied the Queen, "to be as particular now as we were wont to be in the first instance. There can be no doubt that Sagoonah's reason is gone—and it may be for ever! On this point the medical attendant has spoken most positively; and I cannot but concur with his opinion. Perhaps in one sense it is fortunate for her that she should have lost the memory of the misdeeds which she has committed; though in another sense it may be unfortunate,—for if this state of mental torpor should continue, she will have no opportunity to repent of her sins. But as I was observing, it is no longer needful, my dear Christina, to watch so continuously over her. Provided you will every now and then visit the chamber during my absence, it is sufficient. Indeed, I was thinking that if during the two or three hours I may be away from the villa you would do me a little service——"

"Anything, dear lady!" exclaimed Christina, who was always ready to testify her grateful devotion to her at whose hands she had received so many benefits.

"It is one of the little services," continued the Queen, "which Sagoonah herself was wont to perform—I mean the arrangement of my jewel caskets. They require frequent supervision, and likewise to be touched by a delicate hand; so that it is to none of the domestics that I can entrust the duty."

"It shall be performed to the best of my ability," responded Christina: "and I hope to your ladyship's satisfaction."

This dialogue, as we have said, took place in Sagoonah's chamber,—the Queen and her young friend being utterly unsuspicious that every syllable was perfectly comprehended by the ayah. The nurse was absent at the moment: but she speedily made her appearance; and while Indora took her departure in the carriage to pay the intended visit to Miss Vincent, Christina repaired to her Majesty's boudoir to commence the task of inspecting and arranging the gems and jewels of inestimable price which belonged to her royal benefactress.

Sagoonah now felt that her opportunity was at hand. There she lay, to all appearance in a profound torpor,—the elderly nurse entertaining no notion to the contrary. It has been said that there are certain reptiles which simulate death in order the more easily to secure their intended victims; and thus was it that the treacherous Hindoo woman, like one of the most designing and deadly serpents of her own native clime, was affecting complete inanimation of the intellect, though all the while endowed with the fullest mental vitality.

The elderly nurse busied herself in putting the chamber in order; and then, hearing the clock proclaim the hour of midday, she knew it was the time to procure the refreshment which she was wont to administer to her patient. It was her custom to leave the room only when the Queen or Christina should be present: but on this occasion she happened to deviate from her rule—and thus all the more completely favoured the projects of the ayah. Indora was absent—Christina was engaged—Sagoonah seemed wrapped up in mental torpor: the nurse saw not the slightest harm in descending to the kitchen to procure what she required. The ayah waited a few minutes to see whether anybody would come: but the nurse sent no one to take her place temporarily—and Sagoonah was not long ere she availed herself of the

opportunity. She descended from the couch: she opened the door and listened: there was no one on the staircase or the landing. She knew—or at least conceived to the best of her knowledge, that Christina was in the Queen's boudoir: and it was towards Christina's chamber that she sped. A dress, a shawl, a bonnet, and other needful articles of the toilet, were quickly taken possession of; and Sagoonah glided back to her own room, having succeeded in escaping all observation. She thrust the articles of apparel into a cupboard, and lay down in the bed again. Scarcely had she thus resumed her place on the couch, when the door opened, and the nurse made her appearance.

The woman suspected not what had been done in her absence; and while she was administering food to Sagoonah—who received it with the vacant docility of an infant—Miss Ashton entered. Believing that all went well, Christina soon retired, and returned to Indora's boudoir, where she resumed her occupation with the jewels. Meanwhile Sagoonah was nerving herself for the final effort to escape; and now came the most difficult and perilous part of her pre-arranged plan.

The nurse was seated by the side of the couch, with her attention deeply absorbed in a volume of a novel. Her back was partially turned towards Sagoonah, so that she might all the more conveniently catch upon the page the light from the windows. All of a sudden the sheet was thrown over the nurse's head—it was drawn tight across her mouth—and Sagoonah's voice, speaking with unmistakable power and plainness, cried, "Dare to shriek forth, and I will straugle you?"

The nurse, overwhelmed with terror, sank down in a swoon; and the ayah, springing from the bed, convinced herself that the woman was indeed plunged into a state of unconsciousness. She suffered her to lie where she had fallen; and the sheet being taken off her, Sagoonah kept her eyes rivetted upon the nurse's countenance, so that she might be prepared for the first indication of her awakening. With all possible speed did Sagoonah apparel herself in the garments she had taken from Christina's room; and the nurse gave no sign of life while the ayah was thus performing her toilet.

It was with an exulting heart that Sagoonah found circumstances to be progressing thus favourably: but still there were risks to be incurred. At any moment Christina might enter the chamber; or she might encounter that young lady upon the stairs. Nevertheless, Sagoonah was prepared for everything, rather than renounce the plan which had thus far progressed so satisfactorily. The old nurse was just beginning to give signs of returning consciousness, when Sagoonah opened the door—listened for an instant—and then hurried forth. It was a garden-bonnet, with a blue gauze veil, which she had taken from Christina's room; and she drew that veil over her countenance. Gliding down the stairs, she reached the hall just as a female-servant was entering it from the further extremity. Sagoonah sped to the front door with a degree of haste which somewhat astonished the domestic, who took her to be Miss Ashton. In a moment however the disguised Hindoo woman disappeared from the servant's view; and the front door closed behind her.

Sagoonah was now free. She hastened through the garden—she reached the gate—she sped along the lane towards the main road. She looked back: no one was in pursuit:—more elated grew her heart—her feelings were indeed now at the highest pitch of exultation!

Sagoonah hastened onward. She dared not enter a vehicle, for she had no money in her pocket; and she had lived long enough in England to have a full knowledge of the indispensable character of that article in its application to nearly all the circumstances of life. But she had not proceeded far before she encountered a police-officer; and to him she addressed herself.

Meanwhile her flight was discovered at the villa. The female-servant who had seen her pass through the hall, and had taken her for Miss Ashton, naturally conceived from the precipitation of her egress that something serious was occurring, and that the invalid ayah was perhaps much worse, so that Christina had hurried off to fetch the medical attendant. The servant ascended the stairs, to see if she could render the nurse any assistance: but on entering the sick chamber, she was stricken with dismay on finding that Sagoonah was gone and that the nurse lay gasping upon the carpet. The servant rang the bell instantly for assistance, while she began to administer restoratives to the nurse; and the first person who answered the pealing of that bell, was Christina herself. Explanations were speedily given; and a rapid search made in Christina's own chamber, cleared up the mystery. Some of her apparel had disappeared: the ayah had evidently fled!

The faithful Mark—the Queen's major-domo—sped in pursuit: but it was too late—Sagoonah was nowhere to be found. Christina was at first almost frantic, blaming herself for not having exercised sufficient vigilance during the Queen's absence. She likewise began to reproach the nurse for what she naturally conceived to be her treacherous complicity in the flight; because Miss Ashton could not conjecture that Sagoonah herself had procured the apparel which served as the disguise for her departure. The nurse however protested her innocence, and explained what had occurred, so far as the sudden attack upon herself was concerned. The condition in which she was found by the female servant, corroborated her tale; and Christina, now convinced that the swoon was no simulated one, regretted the reproaches she had addressed to the poor woman. The nurse admitted having left Sagoonah alone for about ten minutes; and thus the manner in which the apparel might have been procured, seemed to be fully explained. That the ayah had been practising some stupendous hypocrisy was also apparent; for that she could have so suddenly regained her senses and adopted such energetic proceedings without deliberation and forethought, was not to be supposed. Mark, on his return from his ineffectual pursuit, was despatched by Christina with the intelligence to Queen Indora at Isabella Vincent's mansion; and her Majesty returned in all haste to the villa. Thence she despatched a note to Mr. Redcliffe at his lodgings in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square.

Let us now return to Sagoonah, whom we left at the moment she was accosting the first police-officer whom she encountered after her flight from the villa.

"You are a constable?" she said; "and it is your duty, I believe, to assist the law and further the cause of justice?"

The officer replied in the affirmative: but he was not a little astonished at the mode in which he was thus addressed—especially as through the blue gauze he caught a glimpse of a countenance which, though with a dusky complexion, was nevertheless of extraordinary beauty.

"I have some information to give respecting a great offender," proceeded Sagoonah: "but I have learnt and read enough of your English customs to be aware that I must address myself to a magistrate. Will you conduct me to one?"

For a moment the suspicion flitted through the officer's brain that it was rather to a lunatic-asylum than into the presence of a magistrate that the ayah ought to be conducted: but still there was something sufficiently collected in her speech to stagger him.

"What is this information that you have to give?" he inquired.

"I will only tell it to a functionary competent to act upon it," was Sagoonah's response; "and therefore if you will not at once take me to a magistrate, I must address myself to some other person."

"Come with me, if you please," said the officer: and he conducted her to the nearest station-house.

There Sagoonah repeated to the Inspector what she had said to the police-constable; and the Inspector, taking her into a private room, questioned her more closely. Without telling him everything, she nevertheless said sufficient to induce him to proceed farther in the matter; and ordering a cab to be summoned, he escorted the ayah to the police-office in Bow Street. There he introduced her to the magistrate, who gave her an audience in his private room. She now no longer hesitated to tell all she knew; and both the Magistrate and

Inspector were astonished at the information which they thus received. The account was in all respects so lucid—the details were so minute—the occurrence to which they referred, was so well known, although dating many years back—and the explanations given by the Hindoo woman so accurately filled up a certain gap which had hitherto existed in respect to the sequel of that history, that the magistrate felt himself bound to act upon what he had heard.

Leaving Sagoonah at the police-office for a brief space, we must direct the reader's attention to Mrs. Macaulay's house in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square. That worthy lady was seated in her comfortable little parlour, at about three o'clock in the afternoon; and she was refreshing herself with the remnants of a couple of chickens left from the dinner provided for Mr. Redcliffe and Christian Ashton on the preceding day. Mr. Redcliffe had gone off in one direction, Christian in another, —the former to visit Mr. Coleman, as already described—the latter to call upon Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley, who were staying in London. Mrs. Macaulay was altogether happy: she had nothing to trouble her—for she had now no lodgers on the second floor to vex her with their meanness, inasmuch as Mr. Redcliffe had for some weeks past occupied as much of the house as she was accustomed to let out: indeed this had been the case ever since Christian came to take up his abode with that gentleman. Mrs. Macaulay had therefore not merely a handsome rental coming in weekly; but she and her two domestics fared sumptuously every day on the remnants of the repasts served up to her lodgers. What more could a landlady wish for? She could afford to look with a sort of disdain on the ordinary lodging-house-keepers in the same street; and as for Mrs. Sifkin, the worthy Mrs. Macaulay experienced an ample revenge for all the wrongs sustained at the hands of that woman, by means of the envy and jealousy with which the latter now notoriously regarded her.

Mrs. Macaulay, as we have said, was feasting off the cold chicken left from Mr. Redcliffe's table—flavoured with a slice of the ham that Mr. Redcliffe had for his breakfast—and washed down by two or three glasses of sherry which, being at the bottom of one of Mr. Redcliffe's decanters, could not possibly be either wanted or missed by that gentleman! Presently there came a knock at the door—a good loud commanding double knock; and when the parlour-maid had answered the summons, Mrs. Macaulay heard a masculine voice inquire, "Is Mr. Redcliffe at home?"

"No, sir—he is not," replied the servant-girl.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the visitor; "I am very sorry for that—I wish to see him most particularly! When do you think he will return?"

"I'm sure, sir, I don't know," was the servant's response: "but his dinner is ordered for half-past five as usual. Perhaps however missus knows when he will come in."

Mrs. Macaulay made her appearance in the passage at this stage of the conversation; and she perceived that the visitor was a tall stout man, with bushy whiskers—and if not of very elegant appearance, still far from vulgar.

"Is it very important, sir?" she inquired: for she was always mightily curious to glean whatsoever she could of Mr. Redcliffe's proceedings or affairs.

"Well, it is important," answered the visitor. "I have just arrived from India, and have got a letter for Mr. Redcliffe. I should like to deliver it into his own hands. You know perhaps, ma'am, that Mr. Redcliffe was a considerable time in India?"

"I have heard so," answered Mrs. Macaulay "Well, if it is so very important, I think I can tell you where to find Mr. Redcliffe; for he had a cab fetched when he left about half-past two o'clock —and though I wasn't purposely listening——for I should scorn the action——I nevertheless heard him tell the driver to take him to his solicitor's, Number —, Bedford Row, Holborn."

"I am exceedingly obliged," said the visitor; and away he went.

Now this individual was none other than the Inspector of Police of whom we have so recently spoken, and who had disguised himself in plain clothes in order to procure the information that he needed. He returned at once to Bow Street, and took another constable, as well as Sagoonah herself, with him in a cab. They proceeded to Bedford Row; and the Inspector, still wearing his plain clothes, bade the constable recline back so that his uniform might not be seen. The Inspector himself alighted, and entered alone into the clerks' office. His inquiry was promptly made; and the answer was as promptly given:—Mr. Redcliffe was there, and was engaged at the time in Mr. Coleman's private office up-stairs.

The Inspector stepped out into the street, and quickly returned, accompanied, by the officer and Sagoonah. The presence of the latter was not needed for the purpose of immediately identifying the one who was to be captured: but she had insisted upon seeing out the matter to the very end. She was so fearful that her victim would escape; and moreover, all her love being turned to burning hatred, she longed to gloat over his downfall!

The clerks in the ground-floor office were astonished and dismayed at beholding a constable in the society of the individual in plain clothes who had made the inquiry relative to Mr. Redcliffe: but he speedily announced himself to be an officer of justice; and he warned those present to beware how they raised any alarm which might defeat the purpose that had brought him thither.

In the room up-stairs Mr. Coleman had just pronounced the bills given by Armytage to be forgeries: the Duke of Marchmont was thrown into consternation—the wretched forger himself was smitten with unspeakable horror,—when the door burst open, and the Inspector made his appearance, followed by Sagoonah and the constable.

The ayah had thrown up her veil—the Duke of Marchmont at once recognised her—and his guilty conscience smote him with the idea that she had come with the officers of justice to arrest him as the instigator of the assassin-deed which being intended against her royal mistress, had stricken herself. Armytage, at the sight of a constables uniform, gave vent to a hollow moan at the thought that he was the object of so ominous a visit. Mr. Coleman was seized with astonishment, and perhaps also with misgivings in respect to the motive of the sinister presence.

The Inspector glanced around upon the lawyer, the Duke, and Mr. Armytage; and when he laid

not his hand upon either, nor ordered the constable in uniform to take any one into custody. Marchmont and Armytage began to breathe more freely: but Mr. Coleman's misgivings increased.

"There is an inner room," said the Inspector, advancing towards the door of the apartment in which Mr. Redcliffe was all this while concealed.

"It is private!" exclaimed Mr. Coleman, placing his back against it.

"Private, or not private," said the Inspector resolutely, "I must do my duty. Come, sir—have the goodness to stand aside, or I shall be compelled to use force."

"Beware how you violate the privacy of my offices!" exclaimed Mr. Coleman: but the agitation and distress which he displayed, more than ever convinced the police officials that he whom they sought was in the adjacent room.

The Inspector was just upon the point of laying his hand upon the lawyer for the purpose of removing him by force, when the handle of the door was turned from within, and a voice exclaimed, "Resist them not, my friend! I surrender!"

It was with a low gasping moan that Mr. Coleman stood away from the door: it opened—and Mr. Redcliffe came forth. The Duke of Marchmont gave such a start, and such an indescribable expression swept over his countenance, that frightful indeed must have been the feelings which were tearing like vultures at his heart; while Armytage gave utterance to a cry of amazement. As for Sagoonah—while lightnings shot forth from her eyes, she drew her lithe bayadera form, clad in Christina's garment, up to its full height; and her duskily handsome countenance assumed a look of fiendish satisfaction. But it appeared as if Clement Redcliffe beheld not either of the three whom we have just named: his countenance wore a marble composure—his form was erect—his step was firm as he issued from the inner room; and there was not the slightest agitation of his lip nor vibration of his dark eyes to denote any feeling of uneasiness within.

"Officer, do your duty!" he said, in a firm but glacial voice.

"I arrest you, my lord," replied the Inspector, "on a charge of murder. You are Lord Clandon by title—better known as the Hon. Bertram Vivian."

"I am he," responded the prisoner. "Coleman, you will accompany me. Spare your handcuffs, sir!" he added, turning in a dignified manner towards the police-constable who had just produced the manacles. "It is not my purpose to offer the slightest resistance."

The constable was overawed by the manner in which he was thus addressed; and, at a glance from the Inspector, he replaced the handcuffs in his pocket.

Lord Clandon—as we must now call Mr. Redcliffe, *alias* Bertram Vivian—walked forth from the room without bestowing the slightest notice upon either the Duke of Marchmont, Armytage, or Sagoonah; and descending the stairs, he entered the cab, accompanied by the Inspector and the police-constable. Mr. Coleman intimated that he would follow immediately. Sagoonah likewise descended the stairs; and the Inspector said to her, "You must come on to the police-office: we shall require your presence there."

The ayah accordingly took another cab, and repaired to Bow Street.

Mr. Coleman remained behind for a few minutes with the Duke of Marchmont and Mr. Armytage. The lawyer's countenance was exceedingly pale, but no longer agitated: it was firm and resolute. Armytage appeared utterly overwhelmed, crushed, and spirit-broken with everything that had taken place: the Duke of Marchmont was evidently labouring under the almost stupefying sense of a horrible consternation. His countenance was ghastly; and he gazed upon Mr. Coleman as if this gentleman were the arbiter of his doom.

"My lord," said the solicitor, addressing himself with a cold sternness to the Duke, "the event which has just occurred renders it unnecessary for your Grace to remain another moment here. Upon that event I shall offer no observation——"

"But—but," said the Duke, in almost a dying tone, "you will take this cheque—you will settle this business for Mr. Armytage——"

"No, my lord!" interrupted Coleman. "I decline your Grace's intervention altogether. Mr. Armytage will remain with me, to talk over these matters. At his peril will he disobey me!"

"But, Mr. Coleman," gasped forth the Duke, with a desperate but vain effort to assume an air of composure, "as Mr. Armytage's friend you will at least suffer me to speak to him in private."

"Not another syllable, my lord!" exclaimed Coleman resolutely. "And now I insist that your Grace immediately leaves my office."

Armytage—with his elbows resting upon the table—had buried his face in his hands; and he was moaning lamentably—while the words, "Oh, my poor dear Zoe!" escaped twice or thrice from his lips.

The Duke of Marchmont lingered with the air of a man whose desperate circumstances impelled him to make one more effort to save himself from the utter destruction which he saw to be imminent: but when he looked at the sternly resoluto countenance of the lawyer, he was compelled to admit the conviction that everything was indeed hopeless in that quarter. He accordingly issued from the room, reeling and staggering as if under the influence of wine.

Mr. Coleman suffered a minute or two to elapse, in order to give the Duke time for departure; and he then summoned one of his clerks from below.

"Mr. Price," he said, in a hurried whisper to this clerk, "you will follow the Duke of Marchmont—you will watch him day and night—you will dog him whithersoever he goes—and if he attempts to leave the country, you will at once give him into custody——"

The clerk started with astonishment; and it was a perfect consternation that seized upon him when Coleman whispered a few more words in his ears. The lawyer placed a sum of money in the clerk's hand for whatsoever expenses might be incurred in the mission now entrusted to him; and he whisperingly said, "Be cautious—be silent! I know that I can rely upon you!"

"You may, sir:"—and the clerk issued from the room.

Another of the dependants was now summoned from the lower office; and when he made his appearance, Coleman said, "Mr. Ingram, you will remain here with Mr. Armytage till my return.

Let no one have access to him; and if he should endeavour to escape, call in a police-constable and give him into custody on a charge of forgery."

Armytage had all this while remained with his countenance buried in his hands: but when he heard that mandate given by Mr. Coleman to the clerk, he threw himself at the lawyer's feet, imploring his mercy.

"Everything depends upon yourself," replied Coleman; "and you can now more than ever understand how your testimony will become so needful."

Having thus spoken, the lawyer issued from his office—descended the stairs—and engaging a cab, which happened to be passing along Bedford Row, he proceeded to Bow Street.

Before concluding this chapter, we have one explanation to give. The reader will recollect that Mr. Coleman had received a letter upon the perusal of which he had taxed Armytage with forgery. This letter was from another solicitor, who had first of all discounted the bills for twenty thousand pounds that have been so frequently mentioned. Those bills, as we have seen, had fallen into Coleman's hands: for with the aid of Mr. Redcliffe's money he had taken them from the original discounter. This discounter had that very day happened to discover that the acceptance of some mercantile firm had been forged by Armytage to those bills; and he had accordingly written to communicate the fact to Mr. Coleman. This was the letter which, as we have seen, was received by Coleman a few minutes previous to the sudden bursting in of Sagoonah and the police-officials.

CHAPTER CXXXVIII.

THE PRISONER IN THE DOCK.

THE magistrate at Bow Street had not quitted the office, although it was now past the usual hour for his retirement from the bench: but he awaited the result of the expedition on which the Inspector had set out. It was not very long before this official returned, accompanied by his prisoner. The crowd that usually hangs about a police-office, had dispersed in the belief that the business of the day was over: the newspaper-reporters had likewise taken their departure; and the court itself remained empty until the magistrate and his clerk were fetched from their private room by the intimation that the prisoner who was expected, had just arrived at the office. The magistrate accordingly returned to take his seat upon the bench: the clerk placed himself at the table; and Lord Clandon was now escorted into the dock. In addition to the persons already noticed, there were only Sagoonah, the Inspector, and the constable, besides two or three other police-officers, now present. But Mr. Coleman speedily made his appearance; and soon afterwards another individual entered the court.

This last-mentioned person was Mark, Queen Indora's faithful major-domo. It will be recolleeted that her Majesty had despatched a note to Mortimer Street, acquainting Lord Clandon with Sagoonah's flight; and of this note Mark was the bearer. On reaching Mortimer Street, he had learnt from Mrs. Macaulay—as the disguised Inspector had previously done—that Mr. Redcliffe (as he was *then* called) had gone to his solicitor's in Bedford Row, Holborn. Thither Mark proceeded, little suspecting the fearful nature of the intelligence that awaited him. His astonishment and consternation may therefore be imagined, when he learnt from one of the clerks that Mr. Redcliffe had been arrested on a charge of murder, and that he was none other than the Duke of Marchmont's brother, Lord Clandon. Of this fact Mark was hitherto completely ignorant; and it filled him with as much surprise as the incident of the arrest excited his grief. He sped away to Bow-street: and as we have seen, arrived there shortly after the proceedings had commenced.

To prevent any confusion, while the reader refers to some of the earlier chapters of our narrative, it may be as well to remark that during the life-time of the Duke of Marchmont, Hugh (the present Duke) bore the title of Lord Clandon, while his brother was simply the Hon. Bertram Vivian. But when the murder of the old Duke gave the higher title to Hugh, Bertram as a necessary consequence became Lord Clandon; and it is thus that we shall speak of him.

On being introduced into the dock, Lord Clandon lost not for an instant that self-possession, calmly though coldly dignified, which at the moment of his arrest he had worn at Mr. Coleman's office. He bowed to the magistrate: when his solicitor entered he bestowed on him a look of friendly recognition; and when he saw Mark make his appearance in the Court, he beckoned him to the side of the dock, and bending over, whispered, "You will break this intelligence as delicately as possible to your mistress. But wait until you hear everything that takes place!"

Sagoonah had been conducted by the Police-Inspector to a seat just behind the witness-box; and she now looked straight forward, not once turning her eyes after the first glance towards the victim whom her vindictive jealousy had consigned to that ignominious position. She beheld Mark make his appearance; but she affected not to perceive him. Her features were rigid; and dusky though her complexion was, yet a visible paleness, cold and death-like, sat upon her countenance.

The Inspector entered the witness-box, and was sworn. He then addressed the magistrate as follows:—

"Your worship is aware that about nineteen years ago the Duke of Marchmont of that day was found murdered at a short distance from Oaklands, his country-seat in Hampshire. A Coroner's Inquest pronounced a verdict of 'Wilful Murder' against Bertram Vivian, otherwise Lord Clandon. Warrants were issued for the apprehension of the accused: a reward was offered by the Secretary of State for his apprehension; advertisements were inserted in the newspapers—but all without effect. The accused had taken his departure; and during this interval of nineteen years, nothing ever reached the ear of justice concerning him until this day. From information which I received, I have now arrested the prisoner in the dock; and I charge him with being that same Bertram Vivian, otherwise Lord Clandon, against whom a verdict of 'Wilful Murder'

was returned by a Coroner's Inquest in the year 1829."

The clerk of the court then addressed the magistrate:—

"By your worship's instructions, in consequence of the information given this afternoon, I repaired to the Home Office, to which the depositions taken at the Coroner's Inquest in the year 1829, had been forwarded. I have obtained those depositions; and I have them here."

"As the case occurred so long ago," said the magistrate, "it will be necessary to read them."

"Perhaps it would save your worship's time," said the prisoner, "if I were to admit that which it is by no means my purpose to deny, and which I have already admitted at Mr. Coleman's office: namely, that I am indeed that same——"

But here Mr. Coleman rose; and making a sign to the prisoner to be silent; he said to the magistrate, "I should much prefer that your worship would adopt the course you were about to take, as I have my reasons why the whole incidents of the bygone tragedy should be again brought fully to the knowledge of the public. A generation has well nigh passed since the date referred to; and as my client will plead *Not Guilty* to the dread crime imputed to him, I am anxious that, with the true British spirit of fair play, public opinion may be suspended until a jury of the noble prisoner's countrymen shall have pronounced their verdict."

The clerk of the court accordingly read the depositions. They commenced by setting forth how Purvis the butler, and Leachley the valet, had found the body of the late Duke by the side of the pond, with the dagger sticking in its back. Then followed the evidence of the present Duke of Marchmont, as it was given at the time, and which chiefly went to prove that the dagger was the property of his brother Bertram; and that on the evening preceding the night of the murder, he had left his brother at an inn in the neighbouring village, in a terrible state of excitement in consequence of certain matters connected with the Duchess Eliza. It then appeared from the depositions that the landlord of the village inn was next examined as a witness. He deposed to the fact of Bertram having passed about three hours at the tavern in the afternoon and evening of the day preceding the night of the murder—that he was violently excited the whole time—and that he had rushed away in the frenzied state of which his brother had spoken. It next appeared from the depositions that two of the housemaids belonging to Oaklands were examined in succession; and their statement was to the effect that while arranging the chamber occupied by Bertram during his stay at the mansion, they had seen the dagger lying amongst a few other curiosities, which, as they understood, Bertram had brought with him from the United States. The man-servant who had specially attended upon Bertram during his visit, appeared to have been the next witness; and he was represented as having deposed to the fact that Bertram had shown him the dagger, explaining at the same time that it had been long in the possession of some celebrated Indian Chief who died a few months previous to Bertram's departure from Washington. The dagger was described in the depositions and by the witnesses as being of very peculiar workmanship, and once seen, could not possibly have been mistaken.

The depositions proceeded to show that witnesses were next examined to relate the particulars in respect to the dog. It had been found that Pluto was mortally wounded by a pistol-bullet: but the weapon itself had not been found, either in the pond or in the neighbourhood — so that it was tolerably evident the assassin had taken it away with him. The cloth which the dog had brought in his mouth, was a fragment evidently torn from the skirt of a surtout coat; and it was therefore supposed that the faithful animal had flown at the murderer of his master—in doing which he had received the fatal bullet. It was farther shown at the Coroner's Inquest that Bertram had on a black surtout coat when he left Oaklands after the scene with the Duke and Eliza. The depositions went on to state that the evidence being complete, the Coroner proceeded to sum up. In alluding to the circumstance of the dagger, he said "that it had been incontestibly proved that the weapon belonged to Bertram; and that the Jury, with this fact before them, would have to weigh well whether, under all the circumstances, it was Bertram's hand which committed the deed—or whether some other person had obtained possession of that dagger with the foulest of purposes." The Coroner had remarked "that it was certainly extraordinary that Bertram should have had the dagger about him at the time when he was walking with the Duchess and when the incident occurred that compelled him to fly from Oaklands. None of the witnesses had been able to throw any light upon that point,—such for instance as proving that the dagger was still in Bertram's room at the time of his flight—or on the other hand, that they missed it from the room. Certain it was the dagger had dealt the murderous blow; and it was for the Jury to say whether the hand of Bertram or that of an unknown assassin had wielded the weapon." Having commented upon all other parts of the evidence, the Coroner had left the matter in the hands of the Jury.

The depositions concluded by stating that a verdict of "Wilful Murder" was returned against Bertram Vivian, *alias* Lord Clandon.

When the clerk of the court had finished reading these depositions, the Inspector said, "I now propose, your worship, to introduce a witness who will prove that the prisoner in the dock, so long known by the name of Clement Redcliffe, is in reality the Bertram Vivian, *alias* Lord Clandon, against whom that verdict was returned; and I conceive that your worship will hold this evidence sufficient to remand the prisoner, if not finally to commit him for trial."

Lord Clandon—understanding that Sagoonah was the witness alluded to—was again about to address the magistrate, to admit his identity, so that the ayah's evidence might be dispensed with: for with a generous delicacy he was anxious to prevent Queen Indora's name from being brought forward in the present proceedings. But Mr. Coleman, advancing towards the dock, whispered to the prisoner in the following manner:—

"Your lordship must really suffer the proceedings to take their course. As there will inevitably be a trial—and I hope to God it will only be for

form's sake!—but still as a trial *must* ensue, it is requisite we should glean every particular. Queen Indora's name must sooner or later be mentioned in the proceedings; and therefore as well to-day at this court, as in another place a short time hence. I beseech that your lordship will leave yourself entirely in my hands."

"My friend, I will do so," answered Lord Clandon: and the solicitor retired to his seat.

The Inspector now directed Sagoonah to enter the witness-box; and she was first of all questioned by the magistrate in respect to her knowledge of the obligations of an oath. Her answers were satisfactory; and she was sworn according to her own creed. Then—partly in reply to leading questions put by the Inspector and the magistrate, and partly of her own accord—she proceeded with her evidence. She spoke the English tongue sufficiently well to render it entirely intelligible; and it was rather with a peculiarity of accent than in broken phrases that she delivered her testimony. Her veil being raised, the extraordinary beauty of her countenance could not fail to strike those present to whom she was a stranger: her demeanour was coldly calm and collected; and her voice trembled not. But once—and once only—did she glance towards the prisoner in the dock; and this occasion will be mentioned in its place.

She deposed that her name was Sagoonah—that she was about twenty-six years of age—that she had been left an orphan in her childhood—from which time she had been brought up about the person of Indora, Princess, and now Queen of Inderabad, an independent kingdom of Hindostan. She recollected that about sixteen years back, and consequently when she was only ten years old, an Englishman bearing the name of Clement Redcliffe arrived at the Court of Inderabad. He was in the East India Company's service, and came to that Court as an accredited diplomatic agent on the part of the Governor-General. The King of Inderabad, for his own reasons, detained the Englishman at his Court, and caused a rumour of his death in the jungles to be propagated in other parts of India, so that it might reach the ears of the British functionaries at Calcutta. Sagoonah proceeded to state that the Englishman was treated with all possible distinction at the Court of Inderabad—his freedom alone excepted. He had sumptuous apartments assigned him in a pavilion attached to the Royal palace; he had slaves to minister unto him—a guard of honour to attend him; and riches were showered upon him. Those around him were expressly ordered by the King to address with the respect due to a noble of the highest rank. He was the preceptor of the Princess Indora, whom he instructed in all European accomplishments, and whom he converted to Christianity. He was likewise the King's Privy Councillor, and was the means of introducing a multiplicity of reforms into the institutions of the country. All these were of the most liberal tendency; and thus, although he was known to be an Englishman and a Christian, he was an universal favourite with every grade of society in the kingdom of Inderabad. He was always addressed as if he himself were a Prince; and it was generally believed that he would espouse the Princess Indora, and become monarch of the country whenever the old king should die.

It must be observed that Sagoonah related these facts in order to give her narrative as much precision as possible; but that likewise much of the information she imparted, was elicited from her by questions, while the rest was spontaneously afforded from her lips.

She proceeded to depose that the Englishman Clement Redcliffe frequently implored his freedom, but could not obtain it. Thus years passed on. At length, in the year 1845, an incident occurred which made Sagoonah acquainted with some portion of his former history. It appeared that an English traveller was found murdered in a wood in the neighbourhood of the capital; and amongst the documents discovered on his person, was a London newspaper. This newspaper fell into the hands of the Englishman Clement Redcliffe. On that very same day Sagoonah was walking in the Court of Fountains belonging to the palace of Inderabad,—when she was the unseen witness of a meeting on the part of the Englishman and the Princess Indora. The Englishman threw himself at the feet of her Highness, imploring that she would intercede with her royal father to procure his freedom. He said that everything which regarded his native country had hitherto been a perfect blank to him; but that the newspaper which had now fallen into his hands, contained a paragraph bearing allusion to his own family, and to his horror tending to criminate him in respect to a murder which he never even knew had been committed at all. He mentioned the name of the Duke of Marchmont: he mentioned his own real name of Bertram Vivian. His language was passionate and vehement; and she (Sagoonah) thought he scarcely knew what he was saying at the time. Sagoonah continued to depose that she herself, during this interview remained concealed behind a group of shrubs, and that her presence there was not suspected by either the Englishman or the Princess. She never told either what she had overheard, but treasured it up in her own bosom. The Englishman's freedom was not accorded him; but some time afterwards he escaped from Inderabad. Then the Princess determined upon coming to England; and Sagoonah agreed to be her companion. Since they were in England—and very recently—Sagoonah had listened at the door when the prisoner and Indora were conversing together; and she had heard enough to establish the conviction in her mind that he whom she had so long known by the name of Clement Redcliffe was none other than Bertram Vivian—or, more properly, Lord Clandon.

"And the prisoner in the dock," said the magistrate, inquiringly, "is the same person of whom you are speaking?"

Now it was that Sagoonah turned her large coal black eyes upon Lord Clandon; and they vibrated with that lustre which on former occasions had struck him as so sinister, and which had subsequently haunted him for a period afterwards. That look which she thus bent upon him was full of a fiendish satisfaction—of a hatred which had succeeded a once all-potent love; and as she again turned her regards towards the magistrate, she said in a firm voice, "It is he!"

"When you first addressed me this afternoon," said the Inspector, "you entered into very minute details in respect to the murder which took place

in the year 1829. Perhaps you have some explanation to give on that point?"

Sagoonah hesitated for a few instants; and then she said, in the same cold calm voice as before, "I have no objection to explain that subject. My royal mistress procured numerous volumes of an English newspaper called the *Times*, and I availed myself of opportunities to read therein the history of the murder at Oaklands. It was thus that I was enabled to follow up the clue which I had previously obtained in India, and to understand how it was that the prisoner had so long borne a false name."

"Mr. Coleman," asked the magistrate, "do you desire to put any questions to this witness?"

"None, sir," was the reply. "She best knows the reason that has led her to the perpetration of this black deed of treachery; and she may be left to the punishment of her own conscience."

These last words seemed to strike the ayah most forcibly; for she gave a convulsive start—she gasped as if about to say something—and then staggering back from the witness-box, she sank upon the seat a little way in the rear.

"Prisoner," said the magistrate, "have you anything to allege wherefore you should not be committed for trial?"

"I have promised," replied Lord Clandon, firmly, "to leave myself in the hands of my legal adviser."

Mr. Coleman thereupon rose, and addressed the magistrate in the following manner:—

"Sir, I am perfectly well aware that you have no alternative but to commit for trial the nobleman who stands before you. But I have already stated that I wish public opinion to be suspended until a better opportunity shall serve for the complete investigation of this unfortunate and intricate affair. Rest assured, sir, that if my client shall reiterate in another place that declaration of innocence which I now make for him here, it is with a fervid reliance upon the justice of that heaven which may unravel those intricacies that human hands, if unassisted, cannot possibly disentangle. On the present occasion, sir, no more will be said on behalf of the prisoner."

The magistrate then formally decreed the committal of Lord Clandon for trial; and the prisoner walked forth with a firm step to the cab which was to convey him to Newgate.

Meanwhile Sagoonah had glided away from the court—availing herself of an opportunity when Lord Clandon was again whispering a few words in the ear of the faithful Mark, relative to the manner in which he was to break to Queen Indora the intelligence of his calamity.

We must now return to the Duke of Marchmont, whom we left at the moment he issued from the lawyer's office, leaving Armytage behind. The nobleman had not in the first instance arrived there in his carriage: he had been on horseback to see Madame Angelique; and from her villa he had ridden over straight to Bedford Row,—his groom holding his horse while he was in Mr. Coleman's office. On coming forth thence, he dismissed the groom, with an intimation that he purposed to proceed on foot: but it struck the domestic that there was a strange, half-wild, half-vacant expression on his ducal master's countenance.

And well might it be so!—for the soul of the Duke of Marchmont was a perfect pandemonium at that instant. He walked on through the adjacent Squares: he felt as if he were intoxicated—yet without any of the exhilarating effects which wine produces. There was an awful consternation in his brain; and never was he more bewildered than at present how to act. There were reasons which seemed to induce him to fly from the country; and yet he had not the power to take any decisive step. He longed for some one whom he could consult—to whom he could tell everything—who might become the depositor of the stupendous secrets that lay heavy as lead upon his soul: but where was he to find such a friend? All of a sudden he recollected that his brother—his own brother—must at that moment be undergoing an examination at a police-office; and he experienced a feverish, a burning desire to ascertain the result. No, not exactly the result: for he felt convinced that *this* must be a committal for trial: but it closely concerned the Duke's interest to learn what had transpired at the examination. He called a cab, and proceeded to an hotel in Covent Garden, where he asked for a private room and ordered dinner.

Oh! well may the reader imagine that this order was only given for form's sake: but the wretched Duke of Marchmont was unable to partake of a morsel. Food appeared to stick in his throat: wine seemed to suffocate him. He longed to ask the waiter certain questions: but each time the domestic entered, the Duke's courage failed him: he dreaded to hear something terrible in respect to himself. At length, looking at his watch, he found that it was seven o'clock; and feeling convinced that the examination must be by that time over, he could no longer endure the horrible state of suspense in which he was plunged. He therefore mustered up his courage to address the waiter, who he perceived did not know him, inasmuch as he called him "sir."

"Is there not some important examination going on close by, at Bow Street?" inquired the Duke, with an almost supernatural effort to command his composure.

"Yes, sir," answered the waiter. "They say that Lord Clandon has just been committed for trial, for the murder of his uncle, about nineteen years ago."

"I heard something about it as I came along," said the Duke, endeavouring to sip his wine with an easy *nonchalant* air: but he again felt as if it would choke him. "Has anything particular transpired? I mean did the prisoner make any confession? or did he deny——"

"The proceedings were not long, sir," answered the waiter: "only two witnesses were examined—the Inspector and a Hindoo woman; and all the evidence went dead against his lordship. I believe his lordship's solicitor denied the charge: but beyond *that* no defence was offered. You perhaps know, sir, that Lord Clandon is the Duke of Marchmont's brother?"

The Duke made no response: he could not: and the waiter, thinking that he cared no more for the topic of conversation, issued from the room.

The Duke began to breathe more freely; and he said within himself, "It is clear that without the evidence of Travers they can do nothing. Will he remain stanch? or will he — will he betray

everything? The wretch, to have perpetrated forgery!"

Another quick revulsion took place in the Duke of Marchmont's feelings: the momentary idea of safety flitted away; and as he thought of Armytage a horrible sense of danger again smote him. That the ruined speculator was entirely in Coleman's power, was but too evident; and that the lawyer would use this power, the Duke felt frightfully convinced. He was now once more goaded to utter desperation: he rose from his seat: white as a corpse—haggard and ghastly—he paced to and fro in the room. He thought of flight—and he thought of suicide; but he dreaded lest by adopting the former course he should only be precipitating his own utter downfall, and throwing away the last chance of escape:—while in respect to suicide, he had not the moral courage!

Suddenly an idea struck him. It was an idea that arose from desperation's self: but no sooner had it entered his brain, than he clutched at it greedily. Ringing the bell, he ordered the waiter to give him his bill and call a cab. On entering the vehicle he said to the driver, "To Newgate!"

Away sped the cab; and it was followed by another, containing the lawyer's clerk who had been appointed to watch him: for Mr. Price was keen and shrewd, and was not likely to disobey nor neglect his master's mandates. In twenty minutes the cab which bore the Duke, drew up in front of Newgate; and his Grace alighting, knocked at the door of the Governor's house. On giving his name, he was at once ushered into a room, where the Governor received him with mingled sympathy and respect.

"This is a dreadful thing, my lord," said the prison functionary, who was by no means astonished to see Marchmont looking so pale, haggard, and agitated: "but it is an event for which your Grace must have been for long years more or less prepared, as it might have happened at any moment—although, I believe, your Grace fancied your brother to be dead?"

"I come to see that unhappy brother of mine," interrupted the Duke. "Show me to his cell—and let me be alone with him."

It was contrary to the gaol regulations to admit visitors to prisoners at that late hour in the evening; but on behalf of a Duke all such restrictions were readily set aside. The Governor therefore at once obeyed with alacrity; and he conducted Marchmont along the gloomy corridors towards the cell which Lord Clandon now tenanted. The massive door swung upon its hinges: a single candle was burning inside; and by the dim light Lord Clandon was discovered sleeping on the humble pallet. Yes—he was sleeping after the exhausting circumstances of the day; and he slept serenely too, with no convulsing starts—with no tossing nor heaving on the bolster—with no flinging about of the arms. The Governor closed the door, without bolting it,—having intimated to his Grace that he would wait at the extremity of the corridor.

The Duke of Marchmont stood by the side of the pallet, looking down upon the sleeping countenance of his brother. That brother was sleeping, as we have said, serenely; and the Duke murmured to himself, "Would to heaven that I could slumber like him!—Bertram!" and he placed his hand upon his brother's shoulder.

Lord Clandon opened his eyes; and on beholding the Duke he started slightly for an instant: then rising from the pallet, he said coldly, "What seek you with me?"

"Bertram, how can you ask this question?" exclaimed the Duke, adopting a reproachful look and tone. "Am I not your brother?"

"I have no brother," replied Lord Clandon: and for a moment his chest heaved as if with a convulsing sob. "No—I have not a brother! I had once a brother, whom I loved dearly and devotedly; but—but—that time has long passed—and for nineteen years," added Bertram, fixing his eyes significantly upon the Duke, "there has been no one in the world whom I could call my brother!"

"Bertram, your brain is turned," said Marchmont. "Pray listen to me! Gold doubtless can procure your escape—I will lavish it by thousands—by hundreds of thousands, if needful——"

"No more!" ejaculated Bertram, in a peremptory tone. "If all the doors stood open, and no one barred my egress I would not go hence! My destiny shall be fulfilled. I know what it is: I believe in God—I have faith in His justice! And now enough! Leave me!"

"No, no—I cannot leave you thus!" cried the Duke of Marchmont, easily converting his real agitation into a semblance of profound grief. "What horrible thoughts, Bertram, have you in your head?—why is your conduct thus unnatural towards me?—why did you appear before me at Oaklands, to scare me with the idea that I beheld one from the dead? Oh! you must escape—you must fly hence—you must betake yourself to some foreign country! All my fortune is at your disposal—I will beggar myself to ensure your welfare!"

"Leave me, I say!" answered Bertram, who was evidently struggling with violent internal emotions: "leave me, I insist!"

The Duke was bewildered how to act. There was a moment when he was about to fall upon his knees—to entreat—to implore—to give utterance to all the wild things which were agitating in his brain: but yet he dared not. He again looked at his brother: the prisoner's countenance now was cold, stern, and implacable; and as Marchmont hesitated what to do, Lord Clandon extended his arm towards the door, exclaiming, "Begone! I know you not as a brother."

It seemed to be by a sort of mechanical involuntary process that the Duke of Marchmont obeyed the mandate and slunk away from Bertram's presence. The Governor came hastily along the stone corridor to turn the massive key and fasten the heavy bolts which secured in his cell that captive who, nevertheless, would not have issued forth if every door of the prison had stood open.

"I hope, my lord," said the Governor, in a low sympathizing voice, "that your unfortunate brother was grateful for this visit?"

"Do not question me!" replied the Duke petulantly. "Which is the way out?"—for the very atmosphere of that prison seemed horribly oppressive to the wretched Marchmont.

"This way, my lord," said the Governor. "It was towards one of the condemned cells that your Grace was hastening——"

The Duke could scarcely repress a cry of anguished terror at the words which had just smitten his ear; and he rushed into the diverging passage, as if wildly anxious to escape from the air he was now breathing. The Governor of course attributed all this display of powerful emotions on the Duke's part, to a sense of affliction on his brother's account; and he begged his Grace to walk into his parlour and take some refreshment. But the Duke gave no response; and issuing from the gaol, flung himself into the cab, in a state of mind that need not to have been envied by any wretch ever coming forth from that same prison to perish on the black scaffold erected outside.

The driver asked whither he should proceed; and the Duke answered, unconscious of the reply which he was giving. He had mentioned Belgrave Square; and thither the cab accordingly went. Mr. Price, Coleman's clerk, still followed at a little distance—until he at length beheld the Duke enter his own mansion in Belgrave Square, from all the windows of which a flood of lustre was pouring forth; for there was a grand entertainment at Marchmont House that evening.

The Duchess was receiving the *elite* of the aristocracy; and the splendid saloons were thrown open for the accommodation of the numerous guests. There was dancing in the state-apartment—there was play in the card-rooms—and the picture-galleries, brilliantly lighted, were the resorts of the loungers from the saloons themselves. The intelligence of Lord Clandon's arrest had only just reached the mansion: it began to be rumoured amongst the domestics—but to the company it was as yet unknown. When the Duke alighted from the common hack-cab—and pale, haggard, and ghastly, entered the spacious hall—the numerous lacqueys assembled there, naturally supposed, as the Governor of Newgate had done, that his Grace's appearance was produced by the

intense affliction he experienced on his brother's behalf.

"What! is there company here to-night?" he inquired, in a wild vacant manner, of one of the footmen.

"Yes, my lord. Your Grace must remember that this was the evening fixed for the occasion. But shall I inform her Grace that your lordship has returned?"

"No, no—not now!" responded Marchmont impatiently: and reeling round like a drunken man, he issued forth from the palatial residence.

The domestics looked at each other, shaking their heads half-ominously, half-compassionately, as if they feared he had gone mad.

The Duke entered another cab, and ordered the driver to take him to the Regent's Park. There he stopped at the door of Mr. Armytage's house, and knocked an impatient summons.

"Is Mr. Armytage at home?" he inquired of the footman who speedily made his appearance.

"No, my lord," was the reply: "Mr. Armytage has gone into the country."

"Into the country?" ejaculated Marchmont. "Impossible! I left him this afternoon——"

"It is quite true, my lord," rejoined the footman. "Mr. Armytage came just now in a cab, along with another gentleman: he did not get out—but ordered a few necessaries to be put into a carpet-bag—and when it was brought to him, he said he was going away for some little time. He did not know for how long—but said that he should write and say when he was coming home again."

"And who was that other gentleman?" inquired Marchmont eagerly.

"I could not see, my lord," answered the servant; "for it was quite dark, and master was in such a hurry——"

The Duke tarried to hear no more, but turned abruptly away from the door and re-entered the cab. Twice did the driver ask him whither he was now to proceed, without receiving any reply: but on the third occasion of putting the question, he elicited the monosyllable, "Home!" which was abruptly jerked forth.

The Duke knew not what to think of this sudden departure of Armytage. He could not flatter himself that Armytage had contrived to settle with Mr. Coleman and get out of his clutches, without having to make the revelations which had been sought from his lips: for if it were so, Armytage would have been to him to claim the promised reward. On the other hand, the wretched Duke's fears suggested that Armytage was kept in a sort of custody by Coleman, in order to be brought forward to give his evidence when the trial should take place. Indeed, Marchmont was in that state of mind in which he dared hope nothing, but was forced to tremble at everything; and the most grovelling beggar in the streets was in the enjoyment of an elysian state of mind in comparison with this bearer of a ducal coronet.

On reaching Marchmont House, the Duke was found in a fainting state in the cab: he was borne to his apartment, and was soon raving in the delirium of fever.

Meanwhile the intelligence had spread amongst the guests that Lord Clandon was arrested and committed for trial: the Duchess was most painfully affected: she received the sympathies of her friends—and the brilliant assemblage broke up prematurely,—the grand supper that was provided, remaining untouched.

And now Lavinia was called upon to minister by the side of that couch on which her husband was raving madly with the brain's fiery fever.

CHAPTER CXXXIX.

REMORSE.

RETURN we to Sagoonah, whom we left issuing from the police-office after she had heard the magistrate pronounce the committal of Lord Clandon to Newgate.

We have seen that the words pronounced by the attorney, to the effect that the ayah might be left to the chastisement of her own conscience, had produced a sudden and powerful impression upon her mind. It was one of those species of menaces which being thrown out in certain circumstances, touch a particular chord in the heart, and cause it to vibrate painfully. Thus was it with Sagoonah. Love may turn to hate: but when a hatred, so engendered, wreaks its vengeance, it is all the more susceptible of a speedy and poignant remorse. And thus again was it with Sagoonah. She went forth from the police-office; and the memory of that threat haunted her. It appeared to have fastened upon her brain: it clung to her like a curse.

She wandered on, unconscious as well as reckless of the way which she was taking: the excruciations of remorse were strengthening within her soul. She thought of how devotedly she had loved Clement Redcliffe—of how gloriously handsome he was when first she knew him—and of the kindness with which he was wont to speak to her. She thought of that Royal mistress who had loved her—who had made her a confidante—who had ever treated her with so much affectionate tenderness—and who had even passed days and nights by the side of her couch when redeeming her from that death which might have otherwise ensued from the blow dealt by the assassin's knife. Of all these things Sagoonah thought; and her soul was rent with bitterest remorse for the deed of which she had been guilty.

She knew that the penalty of murder is death; and without pausing to estimate or conjecture the value of Lord Clandon's denial of the charge, she was only too painfully assured that he would be pronounced guilty. She would now have given worlds to recall what she had done: she had suddenly recovered as it were from the access of frenzy—the madness, in which she had taken so frightful a step against him. She pictured to herself all the horrors of the scaffold; and though she had never witnessed a public execution, yet her morbid imagination not merely conjured up all the real horrors thereof, but supplied fanciful ones to enhance the mental agony with which she was inspired. She awoke likewise as it were to a consciousness of her own position. She was penniless—she was houseless: she had renounced a happy home—had deserted a kind mistress—and had brought herself to the point of wanting food. Still suffering from her recent illness, she was

now enfeebled and exhausted: she felt the gnawings of famine within her; and she had not a penny to purchase a morsel of bread. Her situation was in itself an almost adequate punishment for the foul vindictive treachery of which she had been culpable.

And remorse on one subject brought its companion-compunctions upon other points. Her conscience told her that she had been a murderess in inclination, although heaven had intervened to frustrate her plans. She had sought the life of her mistress with the bright-pointed steel and likewise by means of the reptile of deadliest venom, —that kind mistress who had ever been so affectionate towards her! Remorse on this account was now lacerating her heart and rending her brain. Her imagination was full of horrors: vainly did she endeavour to dispel them. It seemed as if her mental gaze perforce remained fixed upon the most hideous objects,—ghastly spectres that hemmed her in around—circled about her—stood in her way—and laid their death-cold hands upon her. And the evil spirits of her own creed likewise presented their phantom-forms to her vision,—forms of the dreadfulest aspect! She was burning in the fires of her own tortured conscience: she was seething in a lake of molten lava conjured up by her own fevered imagination. Though living, and upon earth, it appeared as if she were suffering the excruciations of hell itself.

And thus wandered on the wretched Sagoonah through the streets of London—experiencing an awful solitude in the midst of that crowded metropolis—feeling that she was a wretch to whom death would be welcome. But that death—how could she meet it? by what means was she to encounter it?

In the agony of her remorse she resolved to return to the Villa. Yes—to this her mind was suddenly made up. She thought that it would be an atonement if she were to fling herself at the feet of her mistress, and confess everything—although whatsoever she had to confess she knew had been principally revealed during her ravings on the bed of sickness. But all her thoughts were morbid: her mind had utterly lost its wholesome strength; and it was now pre-occupied with the idea that there *would* be atonement in the project she had formed. Oh! if she could only obtain the forgiveness of her mistress—it would be some balm to her heart; and she might at least die less miserably than she otherwise would.

And thus she proceeded towards the villa. But it was no longer with the hurried step of excitement that Sagoonah bent her way: worn down by fatigue and by mental suffering, she dragged herself along painfully. The lithe bayadere form was not now drawn up to its full height; the well-shaped feet no longer pressed the ground with elastic tread. It was as a miserable wretch—with the cares of a universe upon her shoulders, pressing like an intolerable weight—that the anguished Sagoonah was now making her painful way.

Meanwhile the faithful Mark, having taken a cab on leaving the police-office, had reached the villa. Queen Indora was anxiously awaiting his return: for she had a presentiment—aye, even a certainty of evil. Indeed it was but too evident that Sagoonah had been playing a darkly treacherous game, and that she meditated some additional perfidy. It will be remembered that immediately after the ayah had received her wound from the Burker's weapon, Lord Clandon and Indora, in a consultation together, had come to the conclusion that the *one* tremendous secret relating to himself had been fathomed by Sagoonah; and hence those porings over the *Times* of which Christina Ashton had given them information. *Now*, therefore, the Queen dreaded lest Sagoonah in her jealous vindictiveness should betray Lord Clandon's secret; and she had written a note to put him on his guard—that note which, as we have seen, Mark was unable to deliver ere the crowning mischief was accomplished. Therefore it was with intense anxiety that the Queen awaited Mark's return; and the instant she beheld him approaching through the grounds, she hurried forth to meet him. Though the faithful major-domo had intended to break the dreadful intelligence as delicately and gently as possible, yet he could not control the expression of his countenance; and the unspeakable sadness that it wore at once convinced Indora that the very worst had happened.

"Tell me instantaneously what has occurred!" she said: "delay not!—think not that you do me a service by studying my feelings! Your features betray the tale! I understand it all!"

"Alas, my lady," said the faithful dependant, "that I should be compelled to become the bearer of intelligence so frightful——"

"Come in, Mark," said the Queen; "and give me all the details."

She had not shrieked—she had not swooned: she gave no vent to passionate lamentations: but there was something unnatural in her calmness. The strength of her mind was sustained by a hope which was the *one* barrier that separated her from utter despair. That hope was the eventual demonstration of Lord Clandon's innocence.

She conducted Mark into a room, where they were alone together; and he told her everything that had occurred. She listened without interrupting him; and when he had finished his narrative of the proceedings, she rose from her seat, saying, "I will now go and comfort him in his prison."

"Pardon me, my lady," said Mark; "but this evening it cannot be. The regulations of the prison will prevent it. Lord Clandon desired me to implore your ladyship to postpone this visit until to-morrow—and *then* to repair thither under circumstances of the strictest privacy, so that your ladyship's name may not become inconveniently involved."

"I understand," said the Queen: "it shall be for to-morrow. And now Mark—my faithful Mark—no time is to be lost in carrying out the plans which circumstances dictate. You must set off immediately for Oaklands, the country seat of the Duke of Marchmont: you must privately obtain an interview with an old man named Purvis—and you must give him a letter which I am about to write."

Mark promised to do the bidding of his royal mistress in all things; and furnished with a letter, he lost no time in taking his departure. When he was gone the Queen sought Christina.

Our youthful heroine was overwhelmed with

grief on account of Sagoonah's flight, inasmuch as Indora had given her to understand that the direst calamity to Mr. Redcliffe might be the result: for Christina had yet to learn that her brother's benefactor bore a lordly title. The Queen had assured Christina that she acquitted her of all blame in reference to Sagoonah's escape: but still the maiden reproached herself for not having exercised a sufficient degree of vigilance. Indora found her weeping in her chamber; and before she broke the fatal tidings, she renewed her declaration that Christina was utterly absolved from all blame on the *one* point which so sorely troubled her. Then the sad intelligence was imparted; and Christina learnt for the first time all the mysteries which had hitherto attached themselves to him whom she had only known as Mr. Redcliffe. Wild was the anguish of our heroine on hearing how terribly the Queen's presentiment was fulfilled, and how stupendous was the mischief which had resulted from Sagoonah's escape.

Christian Ashton now arrived at the villa. He had been passing some hours with Isabella Vincent: he had returned to Mortimer Street at the usual hour for dinner; and there he learnt from Mrs. Macaulay the terrible event which had taken place, and the rumour of which had just reached the landlady. Half frantic on his benefactor's account, and firmly convinced of his innocence—although until this moment he had ever believed in Bertram Vivian's guilt—Christian sped to Bow Street: but the case was over—and Lord Clandon had been removed to Newgate. Christian, in a state of mind bordering upon frenzy, proclaimed his intention of hastening to the prison to see his benefactor; but he was assured that it was too late that day to obtain admittance. He therefore sped to the villa, which he reached at the moment when the Queen had finished her sad narrative to Christina.

The three—namely, her Majesty and the twins—were now grouped together in an apartment on the ground-floor; and they were conversing in deep mournfulness on the one engrossing topic.

"But we must not despair!" said the Queen: "for God is powerful and just—and he will make the innocence of our friend apparent. Gradually for a long time past have incidents been developing themselves towards this end; and the sudden explosion of to-day may prove after all a necessary link in the chain, according to the inscrutable decrees of heaven. Oh, no! we must not despair!"

The twins gathered comfort from Indora's words; and it moreover occurred to them that she entertained hopes and projects which she did not deem it requisite at that instant to make known. There was a long interval of silence; and the lamp which was burning upon the table, shone upon the three mournful countenances of those who were in that room: for notwithstanding the hope which Indora cherished, and the partial consolation her language had infused into the hearts of the twins, they all continued to feel deeply the position in which Lord Clandon was placed.

The front door of the villa was standing open; and it now struck the Queen and the twins that the handle of the door of the room itself was agitated. They looked in that direction: the door opened slowly; and Christina at once recognised the dress which had been purloined from her own chamber.

"Sagoonah!" was the ejaculation which in mingled horror and astonishment burst from her lips.

"Yes, it is I—the wretched, the guilty Sagoonah!" said the Hindoo woman, as she advanced into the room.

She flung off the borrowed bonnet which she wore; and as the light of the lamp fell upon her countenance, it showed that a ghastly expression sat upon the natural duskiness of her complexion. Christian and Christina had started up from their seats in disgust and abhorrence towards the vile authoress of the calamity which had stricken their friend; Queen Indora was rendered speechless with amazement at the presence of one who she thought would never seek to behold her countenance again.

"Lady," said Sagoonah, advancing towards the Queen, "as you hope for mercy in the next world, have mercy upon me in this!"

"Sagoonah," replied Indora, coldly, and almost sternly, "there are deeds beyond all pardon; and you have been guilty of one to-day. Depart hence!—for if you linger, it will be only to provoke me to wreak a vengeance upon you!"

"Lady, if you would kill me," answered the ayah, in a voice expressive of utter misery, "you would be rendering me a service, at the same time that you would be inflicting a most righteous doom. You cannot loathe me more than I loathe myself: you cannot hold me in greater abhorrence than I am self-abhorred in the intensity of my own feelings. I have been mad: but now I have become lucid—and the clearness of my mind is horrible. Through the deep clear waters of the rivers in our own native land, have I beheld hideous monsters agitating in those profundities;—and thus on looking down into the depths of my own soul, do I discern things that appal, and shock, and horrify me. Although I must suffer terribly hereafter, I am suffering terribly now! There is a hell upon earth; and this hell has commenced with me. Now, lady, can you not have pity upon me,—*you* who are so good, so generous, so merciful!"

There was an indescribable anguish in Sagoonah's tone—a kindred agony in her looks. Her large coal-black eyes appeared to burn with the fearful fires that were consuming her within; and their terrific lustre played like flashes about her brows, as if she had received a portion of the doom endured by the fallen angels in that pandemonium to which the blasting lightnings of heaven had hurled them down. Christian and Christina looked on, appalled—dismayed—yet full of intensest loathing and horror, as if upon the corpse of one who had died of the plague and had come to bring its hideous infection unto them. Queen Indora rose from her seat: there was a death-like pallor upon the delicate duskiness of her complexion; but her aspect was cold, stern, and implacable.

"Sagoonah," she said, "it is impossible I can pardon you! There breathes not upon earth a more guilty creature than yourself. I look upon you as something more hideous, more envenomed, and more dangerous than the very reptile which some time back you brought into the house that it might deal death to me with its poisoned fangs."

"Yes, lady—I merit these reproaches," replied Sagoonah; "and I know that you are acquainted with all my guilt. I am not ignorant that amidst the ravings of delirium my crimes were revealed. But, Oh! suffer me to make the fullest confession now—to detail everything in connexion with the past—to describe the workings of my morbid, maddened mind during the various stages of my iniquity,—suffer me to do all this, and my conscience will be eased! *Then* breathe from your lips a single word of pardon—and you will be conferring a mercy upon a fellow-creature who is truly penitent!"

"What have you to confess that is not already known to me, vile woman?" demanded the Queen. "Oh! if you knew how your presence is loathsome to me——"

"It must be!—for my iniquity is immense," responded Sagoonah, with despair still in her accents and ineffable misery in her looks. "But is there to be no pardon on earth for the sinner, however great that sinner's crime, and when the contrition is commensurate?"

"Speak! What have you to confess?" asked Indora.

"You know not, lady, the temptation which led me on," proceeded the ayah. "I will not speak of the love which was potent even to madness: but I will speak of the manner in which it prompted me to lend a too willing ear to the words of a fiend in female shape who was sent to tempt me. That woman was Madame Angelique!"

Sagoonah then proceeded to relate everything which had at any time occurred between herself and the infamous Frenchwoman, but which we need not recapitulate to the reader—though it may be as well to remind him how Madame Angelique had instigated the ayah to make attempts upon the life of her royal mistress, and how through Sagoonah's intervention she had attained access to Indora on that occasion when she proposed to the eastern lady the visit to the Duke of Marchmont's seat of Oaklands. The Queen was by no means astonished at what she now heard: for Sagoonah's ravings had prepared her for intelligence of this kind: but to Christian and Christina everything was as novel as it was astounding and horrifying. They listened as if it were to some hideous tale of murder avowed in a condemned cell; and as they sat together, the sister clung to her twin brother as if to be by him shielded and protected from some danger that might befal her. As for Indora herself, she listened with a settled cold sternness of look,—a look such as that splendidly handsome countenance had never worn before.

It was at first in the deepest mournfulness that Sagoonah had begun her confessions: but as she proceeded, she grew excited: she interrupted herself with frequent appeals for pity;—she gave vent to passionate entreaties for pardon—her self-upbraidings and her declarations of penitence produced an alternation between an almost frenzied exaltation and a profound pathos.

"Oh! it is all true that I have told you, lady!" she cried at the conclusion; "and you see how that fiend of a Frenchwoman appealed to me through the medium of my weakest points to attempt all these enormities. Perhaps you may understand her motives better than I: and, Oh! leave her not unpunished—for she is one of those instruments of whom the Evil Spirit makes use to whisper dreadful temptations in the ears of individuals reduced to despair. Ah! that story of the snake—I know that it is scarcely credible; and yet it is all as I have narrated it! I myself shudder as I at present retrospect over the frightful details. You must remember well the day on which you took Miss Ashton and myself to the beautiful Gardens containing the wild beasts, the strange birds, and the horrible reptiles? But I will show you how I brought the envenomed cobra to the villa. Oh! I am so anxious to prove that everything I am telling your ladyship is correct!"

It was with the most profound excitement that Sagoonah thus spoke. In the distressed, the anguished, and the morbid state of her mind she continued to cling to the idea that by her present conduct she was veritably making an atonement for her past misdeeds; and she therefore considered it above all things necessary that she could convince the Queen of her statements in every one of their minutest details. Inspired with this idea, she repeated with excited ejaculation, "Yes—I will show your ladyship how I brought the hideous reptile hither!"

Thus speaking, Sagoonah suddenly burst from the room.

"Whither is she going?" cried Christina, affrighted at the vehemence of her manner. "She is frenzied!"

The Queen's first impulse was to command that the ayah should not be allowed to penetrate into any other part of the villa: but on a second thought she said, "Let her have her own way: the more perfect she renders her history the better perhaps will it serve my own purposes. One revelation leads to another; and we will let *her's* be complete."

"What frightful things have we been hearing!" exclaimed Christina with a shudder; "and though many of them were but the detailed repetition of much that we knew before——"

"Yet it is horrible for you, my dear young friends," added the Queen, compassionatingly, as she looked upon the twins, "to hear them in this elaborate and minute form."

Sagoonah at this moment re-entered the room, bringing with her that small leathern case, or bag, which had served her purpose for the transport of the cobra di capello from the Zoological Gardens to the villa. It was of Hindoo manufacture; and we have already described it as being large enough to contain a small rabbit. It had a cover which lapped over the mouth and was fastened with a button. Sagoonah had been up to her own chamber to fetch it.

"Here," she exclaimed, as she re-entered the apartment where she had left the Queen and the twins,—"here is the instrument which served my accursed purpose on that dread day!"

Then, in the same vehement and impassioned strain, she went on to describe how she had captured the cobra in the leathern case, and how she suffered it to escape thence into the couch of her mistress. The twins shuddered with a cold horror, as if the actual proceeding itself were being now realized in their presence; and even the strong-minded Indora could not repel a similar sensation—though there was in her mind a deep feeling of

thankfulness to heaven for the manner in which she had escaped from the hideous peril.

"Yes," continued Sagoonah, displaying the leathern case with a species of frenzy, "it was this that brought the deadly reptile hither. Oh! would that it had darted its coils around my arm and plunged its fangs into my flesh!—what remorse would have now been spared me! Wretch—wretch that I have been! But I swear to you, lady, that such is now my self-loathing—so intense is the abhorrence with which I now regard myself—so sick and wearied am I of life, that were the envenomed reptile still within this case, I would plunge in my hand! Thus, thus would I plunge it in!—and if the serpent were torpid, I would excite it into its fullest and most terrible vitality——I would court its sting—and I would be thankful that I had the power so soon to perish!"

As she thus spoke with impassioned and almost frenzied vehemency, Sagoonah tore open the lapping cover of the case, and thrust in her hand. It was no mere stage-performance to produce an effect: it was the action of one who was labouring under morbid feelings most acutely excited. And as she spoke of stirring up the reptile from its torpor, she passionately ground her hand down as it were into the case: she imitated what she would have done in the circumstances which she was supposing. Her white teeth gleamed betwixt the parting vermilion of her thin well-cut lips: her eyes sparkled with unnatural fires. The twins thought she was going mad. Indora herself was about to use her authority and command her to be tranquil.

All of a sudden Sagoonah drew forth her hand from the case, which she immediately dropped; and then for an instant she contemplated the back of that hand with the most earnest scrutiny. She was seen to reel slightly: and then a cry as if of wild, half-frenzied, and terrible joy thrilled from her lips.

"Oh, I comprehend it!" she exclaimed, sinking upon an ottoman; "and death is coming to me at last! Lady, you are avenged—and my contemplated crime has brought its own punishment! Oh, I am dying!—the deadly poison is even now circulating in my veins! That case!—touch it not inside! Consign it to the fire—let it be consumed at once!—there is death within! The serpent has left one of its venomed fangs there!"

A horrible light now flashed in unto the brains of the Queen and the twins; and with a frightful clearness did they comprehend the ayah's meaning. Cries burst from their lips, as with one accord they sprang towards her. Indora lifted the ayah's hand; and a slight puncture—or rather scarcely perceptible scratch, from which a drop of blood had oozed forth—was visible upon the back of that hand.

"Oh! what can we do to save her?" cried Christina and her brother, as it were in the same breath.

"No earthly power can save her!" answered the Queen solemnly: "she must perish! O Sagoonah! had you lived I could not have forgiven you: but now that death has fastened upon you, I assure you of my pardon!"

The light of an unspeakable joy animated the dying ayah's countenance; and seizing with her unwounded hand one of the hands of her mistress, she pressed it fervently to her lips.

"May heaven's choicest blessings, lady, alight upon your head!" she exclaimed; "and may you yet be happy! Oh! something will yet arise to accomplish this happiness for you!—it is impossible that one so good and generous should be abandoned by heaven! Ah! what balm has your words poured into my heart! I shall now welcome death—for I have received your pardon! The poison is circulating in my blood: I feel it—Oh, I feel it! A film comes over my eyes! Place—place me upon the sofa!"

The dying ayah's wish was at once complied with:—again she took the hand of her mistress and pressed it to her lips. From those lips the vermilion, habitually so vivid, was dying away; and the brilliant lustre of her eyes was yielding to the glaze of death.

"Will you pray, Sagoonah?" asked the Queen: and kneeling down by the side of the sofa, she began reciting a prayer in her own native language.

The twins stood by, looking on with feelings of indescribable awe—Christina clinging to her brother, and he sustaining her with his arm thrown round her waist. For some minutes Sagoonah continued to repeat the prayer which the Queen was uttering: but the voice of the ayah gradually grew lower and feebler—until it sank altogether.

The guilty but penitent Sagoonah was no more!

CHAPTER CXL.

MADAME ANGELIQUE AGAIN.

It was the evening of the next day; and Sir Frederick Latham rode forth on horseback from his palatial mansion at Balham Hill. Completely happy now was the great City merchant in the confidence which subsisted between himself and his wife, the beautiful Anastatia; and that confidence had begun to engender love on both sides. Sir Frederick felt that he could not lavish too many proofs of his regard upon the wife whom he had so cruelly suspected: while she on her part was touched by the altered demeanour of her husband towards her. She comprehended that certain naturally generous feelings, which had long remained latent in the soul of a man entirely absorbed in worldly pursuits, had now been by accidental circumstances awakened; and though she was unselfish, yet as a woman she did her best to encourage them. Thus there was for this couple every prospect of a more real domestic happiness than they had ever before known; and Sir Frederick Latham could not altogether regret the circumstances which, though painful at the time, had given rise to this improved epoch in his wedded life.

It was a beautiful evening in the month of October: all the charms of a late autumn were prolonged; and the trees retained an unusual verdure for that season of the year. Sir Frederick and Anastatia had dined earlier than usual, in order that her ladyship might pay a visit to her mother, who continued to be somewhat indisposed; while the merchant himself, taking advantage of the loveliness of the evening, went forth for a ride on horseback. It happened that he was unattended

by a groom on this occasion, for some reason which it is not worth while to describe. It was by accident, and with no settled purpose in view, that Sir Frederick Latham rode in the direction of Brixton Hill,—where, as it will be recollected, Madame Angelique's villa was situated.

But let us leave Sir Frederick for a few minutes, while we look into the interior of that villa.

Madame Angelique was seated at dessert: but her countenance bore the evidences of a certain inward trouble or uneasiness. It was clear that the milliner, on retiring from business, had not found the mental tranquillity which she had hoped to experience in the seclusion of her beautiful villa. Presently there was a knock at the door; and Mr. Shadbolt was announced by the pretty parlour-maid, whose face expressed mingled anger and disgust; for she detested this visitor, and he had just taken the liberty of tapping her cheek in the hall. Mr. Shadbolt—as was now usual with him—had been dining luxuriantly, and it seemed as if the viands of which he had partaken, had been washed down with a considerable amount of generous wine. Indeed it was in a state of semi-ebriety that he was thus introduced into Madame Angelique's presence.

"Well, what news?" he inquired, taking a seat, and at once filling a wine-glass for himself.

"It is singular that I have not seen the Duke," replied Madame Angelique, rather in a musing tone to herself, than exactly addressing her visitor.

"What Duke? Your friend Marchmont of whom you so constantly speak?" he inquired.

"Yes. I forgot I had not seen you since he called yesterday. It was immediately after you left."

"Well, I can tell you," rejoined Shadbolt, "that the Duke is lying in a desperate state at his house in Belgrave Square."

"Ah!" ejaculated Madame Angelique: and then she muttered to herself, "No wonder! no wonder!"

"I suppose you know," continued Shadbolt, "that his brother Lord Clandon suddenly turned up yesterday and was arrested?"

"Yes, I know it all," answered Madame Angelique. "I read the paragraph that was in this morning's paper; and the evening one," she added, glancing towards the *Globe*, which lay upon the sofa, "contains a longer account of what yesterday took place at Bow Street. It seems that the very Mr. Coleman concerning whom you had been frightening me so——"

"Yes—the arrest took place at his office," said Shadbolt, speaking with his mouth full of cake; "and the Duke himself was in the place at the time. There was a Hindoo woman too——"

"I know it," interrupted Madame Angelique curtly. "When the Duke called upon me after you left the villa yesterday, I told him all you had been saying to me——"

"Well—and what then?" asked Shadbolt with a momentary eagerness.

"Why, to speak plainly," responded the Frenchwoman, "the Duke was not much inclined to believe that Coleman was a man who would accept a bribe of two hundred guineas to desist from prosecuting me. However, he said he would go and see Mr. Coleman on my behalf; and, as it must have happened, the Duke's brother was there at the very same moment. So the Inspector said in the account of the capture which he gave to the magistrate, and which is in the newspaper."

"But the Duke did not come back to you—eh?" observed Mr. Shadbolt. "Well, all I can tell you is that if you hadn't given me that little douceur of two hundred guineas to slip into Coleman's hand——"

"I hope it is all right, and that you have not been deceiving me?" said Madame Angelique, looking very hard at Mr. Shadbolt.

"I deceive you?" he exclaimed. "What—honest Ike Shadbolt deceive his dear and intimate friend, the amiable and excellent Madame Angelique? Not I indeed! Look at me. Do I seem a man capable of playing such a dirty trick?"

"I hope not," responded the Frenchwoman; "and I hope likewise that everything is now safe in that quarter?"

The reader will have no doubt comprehended that the unprincipled Shadbolt had been playing a trick by working on Madame Angelique's fears, in order to obtain the money of which he stood in need: for his extravagances were unlimited, and he had taken to gambling.

"You see, my dear friend," he continued, refilling his glass, and helping himself to another slice of cake, "all those lawyer fellows are open to bribes; and as Coleman knows so much about you, we shall have to fee him occasionally. But what think you of letting me make an attempt in some other quarter, as a means of raising the wind?"

"No, never!" ejaculated Madame Angelique firmly. "That business of the Lathams was enough for me. I never was so frightened in my life!"

"Well, well," said Shadbolt, "just as you please. I must take myself off now: I just dropped in to inquire after your precious health, and tell you how nicely and comfortably I had settled that little affair with Coleman."

"But what of the Duke of Marchmont?" said Madame Angelique. "How did you learn——"

"That he was in so desperate a condition?" exclaimed Shadbolt. "Why, everybody at the West End is talking of it. It seems that he took on so about his brother, he went home in a state bordering on frenzy, and was seized with delirium. That is all I know. Ah! by the bye, there is something else I just now heard at the West End. The very Hindoo woman we were talking of——"

"What of her?" demanded Madame Angelique eagerly.

"She is dead," replied Shadbolt.

"Dead!" ejaculated the milliner.

"Yes, dead. Ah! by the bye," repeated Shadbolt, "I recollect you once asked me something about that Lady Indora with whom the Hindoo woman lived——"

"Yes—and you told me at the time that she was instigating Coleman to prosecute me."

"Did I? Well, I dare say it was so," observed Shadbolt carelessly: for though sufficiently sharp, he had not a memory strong enough always to retain the recollection of the numerous perversions of truth or actual falsehoods to which he was prone.

"But about this Hindoo woman — this Sagoonah?" said Madame Angelique.

"I could not exactly learn the rights of it," re-

sponded Shadbolt: "but there was a Coroner's inquest on her body to-day—and it appears that it took place quiet enough. I was told however that the Hindoo woman died from the scratch of a cobra's fang in a leather case in which she had brought the reptile with her over from India. The verdict was 'Accidental Death,' or something of that sort; and that's all I know of the business."

Mr. Shadbolt now took his departure; and the moment he was gone the pretty maid-servant entered to complain to her mistress of the man's rude behaviour every time he visited the house. Madame Angelique was deeply indignant; for she had sought, as the reader has seen, to appear as "a saint" in her neighbourhood. She did not therefore like to have the discredit of receiving such an immoral person as the said Isaac Shadbolt at her house. She promised her parlour-maid to put a stop to his improprieties; and the girl was contented.

Madame Angelique was more than half inclined to believe that Mr. Shadbolt had swindled her out of the two hundred guineas which he had alleged to be for the purpose of feeing Mr. Coleman; and the intelligence she had just received from her well-looking domestic aggravated her ill-feeling against Shadbolt. She inwardly anathematized the necessity of countenancing the visits of such an individual; and her thoughts being agitated, she went forth to cool her brain with the fresh air of the garden.

Madame Angelique was by no means astonished that the arrest of Lord Clandon should have produced such a powerful effect upon the Duke of Marchmont: for it will be remembered that his Grace had made certain unconscious revelations when he was at the ex-milliner's villa, after having experienced serious ill-treatment at the hands of the Burker. The Frenchwoman was glad that Sagoonah had passed out of this world; for she had ever trembled lest an investigation into the source of the murderous attack, which had been by mistake made upon the ayah, should lead to the exposure of antecedent circumstances, and thereby perilously drag in the name of Madame Angelique herself. But still, though that one cause of apprehension appeared to have been removed, the Frenchwoman was far from being tranquil in her mind. She believed that the tangled web which the Duke of Marchmont had woven, might now probably be closing in around himself; and she had been so mixed up with many of his schemes and projects—though at the time unconscious of how far she was being used as a mere instrument, and to what special aims his machinations were directed—she trembled lest there should be a general crash, which might involve herself in the ruins. And then too there was this Isaac Shadbolt, who wielded a sort of power over her, and who she saw but too plainly was resolved to use her purse as his own—who came to the house at all hours—insulted her servants—disgraced her with his intemperance—and feasted at her expense,—there was this man, we say, whom she could not shake off, and whose presence she loathed. Thus, altogether, the ex-milliner found, as we have before stated, that on abandoning her business and retiring to her beautiful suburban villa, she had not alighted on a bed of roses.

She felt the want of fresh air; and therefore had she wandered forth into her grounds. She strolled through the garden, at the back of the house, and passed into a little paddock which lay beyond. It was a beautifully clear evening; and there was a bracing vigour in the air. Still it scarcely refreshed the heated cheeks and throbbing brows of the Frenchwoman: for presentiments of evil were in her mind. As she was walking through the paddock, her ear caught the sounds of some equipage in the adjoining lane: but the trees prevented her from immediately distinguishing what it was; and she moreover bestowed but little thought upon the circumstance. Indeed, so much absorbed was she in her own reflections, she failed to notice that the equipage had stopped at a little distance.

Presently a break in the trees revealed the equipage to her view; and she saw that it was a post-chaise. At the same instant she heard footsteps advancing towards her from behind; and turning round, she beheld two coarsely-dressed men approaching. They were attired as labourers; each carrying a stick in his hand. Madame Angelique was frightened: for she recollected that her men-servants were out on some business connected with the stable; and the situation of the villa was sufficiently lonely to justify her apprehension. A scream was about to peal from her lips, when one of the men said to her in a resolute voice, "We want you—and you must come along with us. All disturbance will be useless!"

Whereupon the speaker seized her by the arm, while his companion caught her by the waist—both alike forbidding her at her peril from crying out. The ex-milliner however screamed; and then a hand was instantaneously placed over her mouth—while one of the men exclaimed in her ear, "It is in the Duke of Marchmont's affair that you are wanted!"

This announcement at once paralysed Madame Angelique; and an awful consternation seized upon her. But at that instant some one was seen bounding towards the spot; and Sir Frederick Latham made his appearance on the scene.

Without pausing to inquire into the nature of the outrage—nor weighing the probabilities of some transgression on the Frenchwoman's part on the one hand, against a proceeding which at a glance was so suspicious on the other—the City merchant grappled with the two men; and a struggle ensued. Wresting the club from the hand of one of the intending abductors, Sir Frederick struck him to the ground; and the other at once took to his heels. Madame Angelique clung to her deliverer: but terror still stifled the power of utterance.

"Villain! what means this?" exclaimed Sir Frederick, thus sternly addressing the man whom he had stricken down, and who, half-stunned by the blow, was painfully endeavouring to rise.

But scarcely was the question put, when another person appeared upon the scene. This was Christian Ashton, who had sprung forth from the postchaise on beholding Sir Frederick Latham leap from his horse and rush to the assistance of the ex-milliner.

The recognition of Christian on the merchant's part was instantaneous; and our young hero hastened to say to him, "Suspend your judgment, Sir Frederick! I hold myself responsible for this

seeming outrage. Let me have a few words with you aside."

"Certainly, my young friend," said the merchant. "Your presence here is sufficient to induce me to suspend my opinion, as you desire."

"Madame Angelique," said Christian, now stepping up to the ex-milliner, and whispering these words rapidly but impressively in her ear, "in the name of the Lady Indora, the dead Sagoonah, and the infamous Duke of Marchmont, I command you to remain where you are! Dare to attempt flight—and I at once proclaim your numerous crimes!"

The Frenchwoman remained transfixed with a sense of awful consternation; and Christian now turned to address a few words to the man whom Sir Frederick Latham had felled to the ground, but who had by this time regained his feet.

"Hasten after your companion, and bring him back! Coward that he is! he might have known that I was at hand to shield him!"

The man to whom Christian thus spoke, sped away after his comrade; and our hero then again turned towards Sir Frederick Latham. Having assured himself by a glance that Madame Angelique showed no inclination to depart, Christian said to the merchant, "Without entering into all details Sir Frederick, I hope to be enabled in a few words to convince you of the propriety of a proceeding which you could not, in your ignorance of the facts, have regarded otherwise than as a most scandalous outrage."

Christian then gave some brief explanations, to which Sir Frederick Latham listened with profound attention.

"And it is not only Madame Angelique," added

Christian, "whom we are thus anxious to secure —but likewise that villain who is in the garb of a Lascar——"

"Ah! I saw by the newspapers," ejaculated the merchant, "that he is a wretch whom justice has long sought——"

"The same!" interjected Christian. "He is known by the terrible appellation of the Burker. From circumstances which have come to our knowledge——But no matter! for time is now pressing."

"Should that villain be still lurking in this neighbourhood," rejoined Sir Frederick, — "and should he happen to fall into my hands—for my people are keeping a sharp look-out—I will at once communicate with you. Rest assured that her Majesty Queen Indora may command my services in every respect; and I beseech you to convey this pledge to her Majesty."

"The two men are returning!" said Christian, as he glanced in the direction whence the individuals who had seized upon Madame Angelique were now retracing their steps from the palings at the extremity of the paddock.

"Madame Angelique," said Sir Frederick Latham, turning towards the ex-milliner, and addressing her with a cold severity alike of voice and countenance, "I can no longer interfere in your behalf. Certain circumstances have come to my knowledge which fully justify the proceeding instituted against you. You will find it more to your advantage to go quietly with this young gentleman and the men whom he has brought with him——"

"Good heaven! what will become of me?" moaned the wretched Frenchwoman, clasping her hands in anguish. "Oh, pray have mercy upon me! Let me fly to France! I vow and declare that never again will I show myself in this country——"

"Your entreaties are vain," interrupted Sir Frederick sternly; "and you have to choose between a quiet departure with Mr. Ashton, and a prompt arrest in the name of the laws which you have outraged. Which shall it be? Let your decision be quickly given."

"Oh! what do they mean to do with me?" cried the miserable Frenchwoman, who naturally pictured to herself all kinds of horrors.

"At present you can know nothing," answered Sir Frederick: "but I repeat the assurance that you have a better chance of escaping from the vengeance of the law by a docile surrender to present circumstances, than by a vain and useless resistance."

"This young gentleman seems kind and good," said the ex-milliner; "and I throw myself upon his mercy. Oh! sir," she cried, addressing herself to Christian, "pray be forbearing towards a miserable defenceless female! I go with you—I go with you!"

Madame Angelique however wrung her hands in anguish as she thus spoke; and she was so overpowered by her feelings that the two men were compelled to carry rather than lead her to the post-chaise. Christian conferred for a few moments longer with Sir Frederick Latham; and they then parted,—our young hero entering the chaise, and the merchant remounting his horse, the bridle of which he had hastily attached to a gate on first catching a glimpse of the attack made upon Madame Angelique.

The post-chaise drove rapidly away; and Sir Frederick passed round to the front gate of the villa. There he rang the bell; and the parlour-maid quickly answered the summons.

"Do not be alarmed at what I am about to communicate," said the merchant: "but your mistress has been suddenly compelled to absent herself for a time. It may perhaps be to her interest that you say as little on the subject as possible—that you devise some excuse — a sudden journey, or something of the sort; but this I must leave to your discretion. You know who I am; and let my word be a guarantee for whatsoever I am saying to you."

Sir Frederick rode off — leaving the half-dismayed, half-astonished Jane to put her own construction on the information he had imparted to her, and give way to whatsoever conjectures it might suggest.

The dusk was now completely closing in; and Sir Frederick rode onward in the direction of Balham Hill. He had not proceeded very far when on entering a lonely bye-lane which he took, he beheld a man walking slowly along in front of him. On a nearer approach he perceived that this fellow had the air of a travelling tinker: his apparatus was slung to a stick over his shoulder: and his garments were grimed with black. Sir Frederick thought nothing of the circumstance; and he was passing the man at a gentle trot, when the fellow began imploring alms. He however suddenly stopped short as if he recognised Sir Frederick: but he had said enough to enable the merchant to be struck by something in his tone. The next instant Sir Frederick—who was very far from lacking courage—sprang from his horse and threw himself upon the false tinker.

The man was however prepared for the attack: for at the instant the merchant leapt from his steed, the ruffian let his apparatus fall behind him, and aimed a terrible blow at Sir Frederick with his club. But the merchant escaped it; and the next instant the ruffian was hurled upon the ground.

"I know you!" exclaimed Sir Frederick, with his knee upon the villain's chest and one hand grasping his throat. "You are the false Lascar—the Burker—and heaven knows what else! Dead or alive, you shall remain in my power!"

The club had been wrested from the Burker's grasp; but he struggled desperately. Indeed, ill might it have fared with Sir Frederick Latham, had not a couple of labouring men suddenly appeared upon the scene; and they happened to be in the employment of the merchant himself. The Burker was secured, and conveyed to Sir Frederick's own mansion.

Intelligence of this capture was forwarded on the ensuing morning to Christian Ashton,—who sent back a written answer to Sir Frederick. The Burker was kept all that day, as he had been detained the preceding night, in a cellar at Tudor House; and in the evening Christian arrived in a post-chaise to receive the prisoner. The two labourers who had rendered such timely assistance, were allowed by the merchant to act as custodians of the captive during the journey to the place to which the ruffian was to be conveyed; and the

whole proceeding was conducted with as much secrecy as possible.

CHAPTER CXLI.

A VISIT TO HEADCORN.

It was now a period of renewed bustle and excitement for Christian Ashton: but all the duties he had undertaken—and which either arose from his own sense of what was expedient in existing circumstances, or from the suggestion of the friends with whom he was co-operating—were most cheerfully performed. Cheerfully—yes! because it was in behalf of his generous benefactor that he was thus deeply, deeply interesting himself,—that benefactor who had given him a home, who had bidden him entertain no care for the future, and who had assured him that a fortune should be his own. All these things had Lord Clandon done for Christian Ashton; and gratitude was amongst the most eminent qualities of our youthful hero.

The reader has seen how he first became acquainted with the tragic history which so memorably attached itself to Oaklands—how he had read the newspaper-account in the library of Marchmont House in Belgrave Square—and how he had subsequently learnt many minuter particulars from the old steward Purvis. He had all along believed in the guilt of Bertram Vivian, *alias* Lord Clandon; circumstantial evidence had seemed so forcibly to substantiate that guilt. But he had believed in it only so long as he was in utter ignorance of the identity of Lord Clandon with Mr. Redcliffe; and *then*, the instant the intelligence of this identity was conveyed to him, the speediest revulsion took place in his mind, and he became as firmly convinced of Lord Clandon's innocence. Away went all circumstantial evidence!—scattered to the winds were all the facts which had hitherto combined to establish that individual's guilt: for Oh! it was impossible that Christian could associate such enormous turpitude with one whose life seemed so pure, whose heart was so generous, and whose philanthropy was so noble. And then too, Queen Indora herself had entered into certain particulars which tended to strengthen the conviction that Christian had now formed: and thus it was with no reluctance—with no fear of labouring in a worthless cause—that our young hero was at present devoting himself to such duties as the position of circumstances suggested.

In pursuance of one of these tasks, we find him taking his seat in a railway carriage at the South-Eastern Terminus, a few days after the incidents we have detailed in the preceding chapters. He was bound for Headcorn—that little village in the neighbourhood of Ashford, to which the unfortunate Amy Sutton had retired in order to conceal her shame from the world. In a couple of hours he reached his destination; and on proceeding to the neat little cottage where he had last seen Amy, he learnt that she was still residing there. She was not however at home at the instant he called: but Mrs. Willis, the farmer's widow who kept the cottage, at once recognised Christian and invited him to enter. In the course of conversation he learnt that Amy had become a mother a few weeks previously—but that the offspring of her dishonour perished at its birth. It further appeared that Amy had since been very ill; and that only a few days had elapsed since she left the couch of sickness to breathe the fresh air. She had now gone to ramble for a short distance in the adjacent fields; and her return might be soon expected. Mrs. Willis informed Christian that the unhappy young woman had suffered even more from mental anguish than from physical malady—that at times she had been seized with fits of violent excitement—while at others she had sunk into moods of the deepest despondency. All this the farmer's widow related in a spirit of benevolent compassion, and not with the whispering tongue of scandal; nor did she exhibit the slightest curiosity in respect to the motive of our hero's visit.

Amy soon afterwards made her appearance; and Christian was shocked by the alteration that had taken place in her. She was not more than twenty-five—but she looked a dozen years older: her countenance was thin, haggard, and careworn. He had known her as exceedingly handsome: he now beheld all her beauty faded; while her toilet—once so exquisitely neat—indicated, if not an actual slovenliness, at least a disregard for all personal embellishment.

The animation of joy however appeared upon the unfortunate young woman's features, as she welcomed Christian Ashton. She entertained both respect and friendship for our young hero; and she was deeply grateful for the present visit.

"I have often and often wondered, Mr. Ashton," she said, "whether you had forgotten me altogether. It would have been natural if you had; for the unfortunate and disgraced ones of the earth are seldom borne in the memory—unless it is to be thought of with contumely and scorn——although of these feelings I at least knew *you* to be incapable!"

"I *have* frequently thought of you, Amy," answered Christian; "and it has been with pity, sorrow, and compassion. You judge me rightly: I am incapable of regarding the consequences of another's black infamy as the results of your own willing sinfulness. Yes—I have pitied you; and even if I had not this day come to converse with you on matters of business, I should not have suffered a much longer interval to elapse ere making an inquiry after your welfare."

Tears were trickling down the young woman's countenance; and with a crimson glow upon her cheeks, she said, "You have doubtless heard from Mrs. Willis——"

"I have heard all that concerns you, Amy; and I have been distressed to learn that you have suffered so severely from illness. But on your part, have you received any tidings of the important events which have recently occurred in London?"

"Yes," answered Miss Sutton: "my sister Marion has sent me letters and newspapers——"

"Then you know that Lord Clandon is alive," interjected Christian,—"that he has been arrested——"

"Yes—and likewise that the villain Marchmont himself is dangerously ill. Oh!" exclaimed Amy, her eyes, hitherto lustreless, now flashing fire, "he must not die until I have wreaked some terrible vengeance upon him! It was but a few days ago

I received from my sister a letter giving me the hope that the period for such vengeance was near at hand——"

"To deal frankly with you, Amy," interrupted Christian, "it was upon these points that I came to confer with you. You cannot have forgotten all you told me when I was last here a few months back. You gave me to understand that your sister Marion was seeking to succour you in your plan of contemplated vengeance. You informed me likewise that she had become connected with Wilson Stanhope; and I have reason to know that Wilson Stanhope himself had some dark dealings with the Duke of Marchmont. Now I must inform you, Amy, that several persons are engaged in weaving the web so tightly around Marchmont that if he should recover from this dangerous illness into which his own tortured and harrowed feelings have no doubt plunged him——"

"Good heavens! what mean you?" exclaimed Miss Sutton, as a sudden suspicion flashed in unto her mind. "Is it possible that the safety of Marchmont himself is compromised by the arrest of his brother Lord Clandon?"

"You must not question me, Amy," replied Christian Ashton. "I am not now at liberty to explain everything I know. But this much I will tell you—that if you will abandon your own isolated and individual scheme of vengeance, and co-operate with those who, inspired by no vindictive feelings, are anxious only to expose wrong and make right come uppermost—if, in a word, Amy, you will league with us, and throw as it were into the common stock, all such means of prosecuting our plan as you may be enabled to afford——"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed the young woman, with a fierce enthusiasm; "anything, Mr. Ashton, so long as there be a chance of inflicting a terrible chastisement upon the head of him to whom I owe my degradation and my ruin!"

"There is every chance, Amy!" rejoined our hero. "Tell me, therefore, in which manner and to what extent you can assist us?"

"You know, Mr. Ashton," continued Amy Sutton, "that my frail and unfortunate sister Marion suffered herself to be handed over as the mistress of Wilson Stanhope. She knew from me that this man Stanhope had been connected with the nefarious plans of the Duke of Marchmont: she knew likewise that it was my aim to wreak a fearful vengeance, if possible, on Marchmont's head. She resolved to succour me. For some weeks has she been living under the protection of Wilson Stanhope, towards whom she has displayed every evidence of affection; she has lavished her caresses upon him—she has insidiously assailed him with cajoleries—she has adopted every means to win his completest confidence. I need not tell you that he is dissipated—that he is addicted to wine—and that his habits are often intemperate. Thus has she succeeded in gleaning from him certain secrets of the utmost importance, but of which I myself am still unaware; for with a becoming prudence she would not entrust them to an epistolary correspondence. That these secrets, however, would be ruinous to the Duke of Marchmont if made known, I have not the slightest doubt. I was cradling myself in the hopes of a speedy vengeance, when the intelligence reached me of the vile Duke's serious illness—an illness which methought might end fatally. And I was striivng hard to regain sufficient health and strength to repair to London to see my sister, and ascertain from her lips all that she had gleaned from Stanhope in the moments of his ebriety, or when he was under the influence of her cajoling blandishments!"

"You have told me sufficient, Amy," replied Christian, who had listened with the deepest attention to the young woman's narrative, "to decide me how to act."

"But there is one stipulation which I must make!" ejaculated Amy, with a sudden access of fierce excitement; "and it is that whatsoever vengeance you wreak upon the Duke of Marchmont——"

"Understand me well!" interrupted Christian. "It is no vengeance which we are endeavouring to wreak: it is an attempt to expose his iniquity throughout all its various ramifications—and as I before said, to make the right come uppermost. All his crimes shall be made to pass like a hideous phantasmagoria of spectres before his eyes; and those who have been the accomplices or the witnesses of his several deeds of turpitude, shall be marshalled in dread testimony against him. On that occasion, Amy, you shall be present!"

"This is what I require!" ejaculated the young woman: "it is for this that I was about to stipulate! Make use of me as you will: but remember, Mr. Ashton, you pledge yourself that I shall not be forgotten when the crowning moment of retribution arrives."

"You shall not be forgotten, Amy," rejoined our hero. "On the contrary, your presence will be needful. From inquiries which I last night caused to be instituted in Belgrave Square, there is every prospect that the Duke of Marchmont will survive this illness, though so dangerous, into which he has been plunged."

"Oh, I am rejoiced! I am rejoiced!" exclaimed Amy Sutton; and the ferocity of a tigress glistened in her eyes.

The aspect of her countenance did Christian harm to contemplate it: but he could not utter a remonstrance nor breathe a syllable of rebuke: he needed the services and the co-operation of Amy Sutton; and he was forced to avail himself of her vindictive feelings for the carrying out of his own purposes. He remained in discourse with her for some time longer; and on rising to take his leave, he addressed her in these parting words——"

"Tarry you here for the present, to regain health and strength as speedily as you can; and when the moment approaches that your presence will be required elsewhere, you will receive a timely notification from me. You can let me know in a few days how your convalescence progresses; so that I may have the assurance of your ability to travel some little distance when the period for action shall arrive."

"Were I upon the bed of death," ejaculated the young woman, with another fierce glaring and flashing of the eyes, "I would not fail to obey your summons!"

"Farewell," said Christian: "the interval will not be long before your wrongs, Amy, will be avenged as terribly as you yourself could possibly desire."

Our young hero then took his leave of Miss Sutton,—having previously assured himself, however, that she had no need of pecuniary assistance: and retracing his steps to the railway station, he returned by the next train to London.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when he reached the metropolis; and he forthwith repaired to Mr. Coleman's offices in Bedford Row. The lawyer was at his place of business; and he immediately received Christian Ashton. Our young hero reported to him all that had occurred between himself and Amy Sutton; and Coleman listened with visible satisfaction on his countenance.

"Everything progresses favourably," said the lawyer, "for the grand, the solemn, and the awful *denouement* which her Majesty Queen Indora is contemplating. Travers is in our power: Madame Angelique is in our power: the villain Barnes is in our power. Amy Sutton will be forthcoming at any moment when we require her presence; and we shall now have Wilson Stanhope in our power. But there's something more still to be done——"

"Let me undertake it!" exclaimed Christian enthusiastically. "You know, my dear sir, there is nothing you can ask me to perform that I will not at once enter upon!"

"I know it," responded Coleman; "and with so much zeal in this good cause, it is impossible that we shall fail in eventual success. Mesh by mesh the tangled skein which his own crimes have woven, is closing in around the Duke of Marchmont; and he will live, Christian—he will live to encounter the ordeal! Scarcely an hour has elapsed since I obtained tidings concerning him. The dangerous crisis is past; and though he is still raving in the delirium of fever, yet the violence of that fever is subsiding, and his physicians have but small fear as to the result. Ah! little do they suspect for what they are bringing him back to life!—and fearful will be the awakening of that man from the unconsciousness which affords a temporary respite for him! But I was about to inform you——"

"This new task which I have to undertake?" exclaimed Christian eagerly.

"You know," resumed Mr. Coleman, "upon what grounds we were led to suspect that the villain Barnes had served as the instrument of the Duke of Marchmont's design against the life of Queen Indora—that design to which Sagoonah fell a victim!"

"Yes," replied Christian. "From the inquiries made by the police, in consequence of the information given by old Mr. Carnabie, it was ascertained that the Burker in his disguise had been lurking about the Queen's villa at the time the awful deed was committed——"

"And as we knew," proceeded Mr. Coleman, "that the deed itself arose from the instigation of the Duke of Marchmont, there was no doubt in coming to the conclusion that the Burker was his instrument. And such has proved to be the case: for the Burker yesterday confessed everything!"

"Ah! he confessed?" exclaimed Christian. "Then circumstances are indeed favouring us!"

"They are favouring us in all respects," replied Mr. Coleman. "I myself elicited everything from that villain's lips yesterday; and I returned to London last night. It appears from what he stated, that a lady overheard a certain discourse between himself and the Duke of Marchmont, soon after the assassin-attempt was made upon Sagoonah's life; and by the description, this lady is none other than Mrs. Oxenden."

"Mrs. Oxenden?" ejaculated Christian. "Ah! this accounts, then, for the intimacy which she formed with the Duke, and which the other day came to your knowledge."

"You perceive how we have been favoured," said the lawyer, "by what the thoughtless crowd would term chance, but which the thinking man would call providence. Yes—Mrs. Oxenden has been the Duke's mistress; and her testimony may be serviceable. I have caused the strictest inquiries to be made into her mode of life; and I find her to be, as you yourself represented her, one of the most profligate of women. She maintains a paramour—a young man of exquisite personal beauty, but as thoroughly depraved as herself, and with whom she is completely infatuated. My knowledge of the world teaches me that where there is such infatuation on the part of a woman, there is likewise the completest confidence; and however cautious she may be in every other respect—however strong-minded in the pursuance of her own worldly interests—she is nevertheless weak and foolish under the influence of that infatuation, and she reveals all secrets. We must therefore get Mrs. Oxenden into our power, through the medium of this Alexis Oliver. It is for you, Christian, to form his acquaintance; and methinks I can arrange a plan by which you can render him a service,—a service whereby you may all the more effectually gain his confidence and secure a hold over him. But inasmuch as Mrs. Oxenden knows you and has little reason to like you, she would speak prejudicially of you to Oliver; and therefore in your dealings with him you must assume another name."

"I comprehend!" observed Christian; "and I will lose no time in entering upon this new duty."

Mr. Coleman and our young hero conversed together for some little while longer; and then the latter took his departure from the office in Bedford Row.

CHAPTER CXLII.

ALEXIS OLIVER.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening of that same day; and the scene shifts to an hotel at the West End. In the coffee-room of this hotel Alexis Oliver was seated at a table, sipping his claret, and now and then partaking of the dessert spread before him.

We have already said that he was a young man of remarkable personal beauty—not above one-and-twenty—and possessed of features chiselled to a degree of even feminine delicacy. With a purse well filled from the ample resources of Mrs. Oxenden, Alexis was leading a life of dissipation, and enjoying himself in the manner best suited to his depraved tastes and debauched habits.

He was seated at that table, reflecting joyously

upon the hopes which Mrs. Oxenden had lately been throwing out, relative to her intention of making herself Duchess of Marchmont. For a few days this idea had seemed to be reduced to hopelessness by the Duke's illness, which it was feared would terminate fatally: but Alexis Oliver had this afternoon been informed of the turn which had taken place in favour of Marchmont's recovery. It was therefore with additional gusto that he was now enjoying his claret,—having dined alone at that West End hotel where we find him.

Several other gentlemen had been dining at the same place: but one by one they had taken their departure; and Alexis was now alone in that coffee-room. He had not however been left a quarter of an hour by himself, when the door opened, and two new-comers made their appearance. One was Captain Stanley, who, as the reader will recollect, was a young man of about four-and-twenty, exceedingly handsome—and what was better still, of remarkably honourable character. His companion was our young hero Christian Ashton.

Christian had met Stanley after he left Mr. Coleman's office; and in the course of conversation it transpired that Stanley had some slight acquaintance with Alexis Oliver. Christian told him enough to make him comprehend that it was of vital importance to Lord Clandon's ultimate interest that certain measures should be carried out in reference to Alexis; and Stanley—who was himself a firm believer in the innocence of him whom he had known as Mr. Redcliffe, and who had saved his father's life in India—readily assented to succour our hero in his present enterprise. He entertained a thorough contempt and aversion for the character of Oliver: but he had no difficulty in temporarily crushing his scruples in order to further the interests of that imprisoned and accused nobleman to whom his father was indebted for his life. He and Christian had with little difficulty succeeded in tracing Alexis to this West End hotel which was one of the dissipated young man's favourite haunts; and the two now lounged in together, as if totally unconscious of whom they were to meet in that coffee-room.

"Ah, Captain Stanley!" exclaimed Oliver, starting up from his seat: "I am delighted to see you! Come to dine here, I suppose? Well, you could not do better. The turtle is first-rate—the venison excellent. As for the iced punch—commend me to it!"

Captain Stanley shook Mr. Oliver's hand with far more cordiality—or at least the appearance thereof—than he had ever before displayed; and presenting Christian, he said, "Allow me to introduce my friend Mr. Craven."

The introduction was accordingly effected; and then Captain Stanley said, "Had we known of the excellencies of the turtle and venison at this house, we would assuredly have proved them. But we have dined; and it was at a place where they gave us dreadful bad wine: so we determined upon coming hither to take just one bottle of claret."

"By all means join me!" exclaimed Alexis Oliver, who was charmed with Captain Stanley's urbanity of manner. "I shall be delighted, Mr. Craven, to make your better acquaintance."

Our young hero bowed in acknowledgment of this compliment; he and Stanley sat down at the same table with Alexis Oliver; and more claret was called for.

After a little conversation on the light floating topics of the day, Christian rose from his seat—ostensibly to glance at an evening paper which lay upon an adjacent table—but in reality to afford Captain Stanley an opportunity of whispering a few words, according to previous understanding, in the ear of Alexis Oliver.

"Who is this young Craven?" inquired Alexis, in a subdued tone, when Christian had left his seat in the manner just described. "He is quite a youth—he must be at least two years younger than I am—but exceedingly handsome——what the ladies would call a perfect specimen of masculine beauty."

"He is a desperate wild young fellow," replied Stanley; "with plenty of money—for his guardians make him a splendid allowance until he comes of age. He gambles and drinks—and, in short, my dear Oliver, he is twenty times wilder than you yourself are."

"The deuce!" ejaculated Alexis: "he must indeed be a precious young blade! So you have taken him in tow, Stanley—and are showing him, I suppose, a little of London life? But how the devil is this? I thought you were the very pattern of steadiness——"

"To tell you the truth, my dear Oliver," responded Stanley, with a significant smile, "I am heartily sick and tired of what the world calls a steady life; and perhaps too the stillest water sometimes runs the deepest. You see, my governor is rather strict and severe; and therefore what with partially being under terrorism, and what with having hitherto felt no inclination to be particularly wild, I have got the reputation of being altogether steady."

"And now you mean to break out at last?" exclaimed Oliver, laughing merrily. "Well, this is capital; and I like you ten thousand times better than ever I did before. Indeed, I do not know that I ever liked you at all until the present occasion——"

"Oh! if you only like wild people," responded Captain Stanley, smiling, "you will henceforth like me well enough, I can tell you! I mean to break out thoroughly and completely. In fact, I have begun. This young Craven and I are now constantly together——"

"You must let me be one of the party," interrupted Alexis. "The truth is, I want to get into a new set. All my old acquaintances have fallen off somehow or another—or disappeared, I scarcely know by what means. One is in the Bench—another has gone abroad with his regiment—a third has died—a fourth has married—a fifth has taken holy orders—and what the devil has become of the rest, I can't tell. Ruined and turned billiard-markers, perhaps?"

"Why, you really speak, Oliver," exclaimed Stanley, laughing, "like a man of sixty who had outlived all his acquaintances;—and yet you are not more than one-and-twenty!"

"Something of that sort," replied Alexis: and then he added with a half-affected, half-dissipated yawn, "When one knocks about town for two or three years, you know, one does begin to feel cursed old. But I say, Mr. Craven—or plain

Craven I shall call you—for it is decreed that you and I are to get uncommonly intimate together ——We have filled our glasses three or four times while you have been poring over that stupid paper."

"I was only looking at the Sporting Intelligence," observed Christian, with a smile. "The fact is, I have a bet or two——"

"Which is your favourite?" ejaculated Alexis eagerly.

"Seringapatam," suggested Captain Stanley—thus with readiness coming to our young hero's assistance; for he felt perfectly well assured that Christian knew no more of sporting matters than of what was taking place in the moon.

"I don't mind giving you large odds against Seringapatam," exclaimed Alexis Oliver: and from a small pocket cut slantwise on the outside of the left breast of his surtout coat, he drew forth his betting-book. "What shall we say?—a cool hundred to eighty?"

"Oh, by all means!" ejaculated Christian: and then drawing forth his own pocket-book, he proceeded to make a memorandum with as much artistic *nonchalance* as that displayed by Alexis himself.

"I am really glad I have fallen in with you two fellows," proceeded Oliver: "we will have rare games together. And to begin, let us have another bottle of claret?"

The wine was ordered; and when the first glasses had been discussed and approved of, Alexis Oliver—who was now more than half-intoxicated—began to discourse in that mysterious strain of semi-confidence which forms one of the phases of ebriety.

"The fact is," he said, "I am in luck's way at present. I don't like to boast, you know,—but there's the finest woman in all London——you understand me?—she is over head and ears in love with me; and I of course cajole her in a most exemplary fashion. I shouldn't let every one know what game is up: but as we have agreed to be stanch allies for the future, we mustn't have any secrets from each other. Have either of you heard of a certain Mrs. Oxenden?"

"Mrs. Oxenden?" said Captain Stanley, slowly repeating the name, as if in a sort of dubiousness whether he had before heard it mentioned or not. "Why, what did I hear? Surely that is the splendid woman whom Marchmont has had in keeping?"

"Well, you are right," rejoined Alexis. "And she *is* a splendid woman too, I can tell you!—full of passion, and devoted to me. There's no vanity on my part: but it is a fact that she can't endure the Duke——he's laid up now, poor fellow!—but as for your humble servant, she'd go through fire and water for him!"

"No doubt of it!" said Stanley. "But there is no compliment in telling you, Oliver, that you're just the young fellow to captivate the female heart."

"Well," observed Alexis, complacently caressing his beardless chin, "I may have made a few conquests in my time: but I won't say that I have, for fear you should charge me with vanity."

"Not I indeed!" exclaimed Stanley. "Every young man can tell a few tales if he likes."

"No doubt of it!" cried Christian, sipping his claret. "And as a matter of course amongst friends——"

"There should be no reserve!" ejaculated Oliver. "That's just what I say! It is astonishing how we three fellows pull together! I see that we shall get on swimmingly."

"And so this Mrs. Oxenden," interjected Stanley, "is so infatuated with you? What a lucky dog you are! But I tell you what my idea of a woman's love is. If she gives you all her confidence, then she really loves you: but if she keeps any secrets from you, then she doesn't in reality care a fig for you."

"Now, there again we agree!" exclaimed Alexis. "Between ourselves, I saw plainly enough that Mrs. Oxenden *had* some secret from me; and it was concerning the Duke too. Well, thought I to myself, 'I am resolved to worm it out of her:'—so I plied her with all sorts of cajoleries: I poured forth a volley of such vows and protestations—I made her drink champagne, too, of which, by the bye, she is particularly fond; and so by degrees:——"

"You're the cleverest fellow I ever met in my life!" exclaimed Captain Stanley, affecting to be in raptures with Alexis.

"I must give you credit for most excellent generalship," said Christian, throwing in the additional weight of his own flattery. "So it ended by this Mrs. What's-her-name——Oxenden——telling you everything—eh?"

"By Jove, I got it all out of her!" cried Alexis with a chuckle. "But you musn't push me any farther. It's all very fine, you know, for friends to have mutual confidences: but that secret, you understand, is not mine to reveal. It's like a sacred deposit——"

"Oh, of course!" ejaculated Stanley: "keep your own counsel in that respect. Neither Craven nor myself would wish you to do anything that is unhandsome."

"Not for the world!" cried Christian. "But we don't drink!"

"Ah, the poor Duke!" said Oliver, shaking his head with a mysterious significancy. "If he only knew everything! By Jove, I could tell a secret if I liked! But I won't! No, no—it would be too bad!"

"I tell you what," said Stanley: "you shall both of you dine with me to-morrow. Let it be at the Clarendon Hotel at six o'clock."

"You shall both dine with me the day after," added Christian. "We will go to Blackwall."

"Now, these are arrangements that I like," said Alexis: "they prove that we are getting all right and comfortable with each other. The day afterwards you shall dine with me at this very hotel; and I'll show you whether I exaggerated just now about the turtle and venison. But what are we going to do for to-night?"

"Drink another bottle of claret!" exclaimed Christian, looking at his watch; "and then away whithersoever you choose!"

Scarcely were the words spoken, when the waiter entered the coffee-room; and said to Alexis Oliver, "If you please, sir, a person wishes to speak to you on very particular business."

"The deuce!" exclaimed the young gentleman, somewhat sobered by an announcement which evi-

dently struck him as something ominous. "I don't like these persons who just want to speak to you!—Waiter, what sort of a looking man is he?"

"Well, sir," replied the functionary, thus appealed to; "he looks something like a sporting character—cut-away coat with brass buttons, sir—red whiskers, sir——"

"Oh, you had better see him!" exclaimed Stanley. "I dare say it is some fellow connected with the Turf, and who has heard that you are making up a book."

"Ah, very likely!" ejaculated Alexis, clutching at the hope. "Let him come in, waiter."

"Come in? Yes, sir," said the waiter: and he shuffled away with that peculiar coffee-room walk which it would seem every accomplished waiter must necessarily possess: but the man had upon his countenance a certain sly expression which failed not to attract the notice of Captain Stanley and Christian.

"The truth is," said Alexis Oliver, when the waiter had retired, "I have got four or five cursed little things hanging over my head. Mrs. Oxenden has given me the money two or three times to pay them: but it has always burnt a hole in my pocket, as the boys say at school. So it rather frightens one when a suspicious message is delivered."

The door of the coffee-room was now thrown open; and the visitor walked in. The door swung back on its hinges; but the waiter just placed it ajar, that he might listen outside to the proceedings, the nature of which he more than half suspected—and perhaps chiefly so from the fact that when the person in the cut-away coat had entered the hotel, another individual in a more seedy garb remained lurking against a lamp-post opposite.

The individual in the cut-away coat advanced with a polite bow towards the table at which the three young gentlemen were seated; and Alexis Oliver's looks showed that he was by no means reassured by the appearance of his visitor.

"*You*, sir, are Mr. Oliver?" said this person, at once singling out the gentleman whose name he had mentioned; "and my name is Solomons. You know my errand—sorry to disturb a gentleman at his wine—but Coleman the lawyer was peremptory in his instructions—and Mabley his client won't wait another hour. So you see, sir, it's no fault of mine: but I tried to do the business in as delicate a way as possible."

"What does all this mean?" exclaimed Christian, starting up from his seat with a well assumed air of indignation.

"Nothing that concerns you, sir," observed Mr. Solomons, with an air of exceeding politeness. "It's just a trifle of a hundred and ninety odd pound that regards Mr. Oliver."

"By Jove this is unfortunate!" cried Alexis. "I wish I hadn't been fool enough to go to Tattersall's to-day and buy the chesnut at Sir William Katchflatt's recommendation. Mrs. Oxenden too isn't at home——"

"What is it you require?" exclaimed Christian. "A couple of hundred pounds to settle this debt? I have the bank-notes about me——"

"Beg your pardon, gentlemen," interrupted the bailiff: "but Mr. Oliver must come along to my house while we search the Office to see if there's anything else out against him."

"And if so, I dare say we can settle it!" exclaimed Christian.

"Ah! that's what I call true friendship!" cried Alexis. "Bravo, my boy, I shan't forget this in a hurry! I suppose I must go to the lock-up——"

"Let us settle the bill here," ejaculated Stanley; "and we will all go together in a cab. There's nothing like seeing one's friend through his difficulties. Just step outside, Mr. Solomons: we will join you in a few minutes. I suppose you can trust us; and you'll have a couple of guineas for your civility."

Christian made a sign for the officer to comply; and Mr. Solomons, who had especial instructions from Mr. Coleman, hesitated not to do whatsoever our hero directed. He therefore withdrew: the waiter was summoned—the bill was paid—and the three gentlemen issued from the hotel. A cab was speedily procured: they took their seats inside: Mr. Solomons rode upon the box: and his man was left to tramp back to Chancery Lane on foot. During the drive thither, Alexis Oliver vowed eternal friendship to Christian, who played his part so well, that it seemed as if he was only doing the most natural thing in the world in undertaking to pay the debts of his new acquaintance. But all the time Mrs. Oxenden's paramour was thus expressing his gratitude, he thought within himself that of the green and inexperienced young gentleman he had ever encountered, his new friend Craven was assuredly the greenest and the most inexperienced.

The sponging-house was reached: the three gentlemen were shown to a room—more wine was ordered—and a considerable fee was exacted for the process of searching the Sheriff's Office at that time of night, for it was now past ten o'clock. Nearly an hour elapsed,—Alexis volunteering three or four songs, and appearing most supremely to enjoy the situation in which he was placed—as well indeed he might, considering that his debts were to be paid from the purse of another.

At the expiration of the hour, Mr. Solomons reappeared, with the intimation that there were other judgment-writs out against Mr. Oliver, and that the entire sum requisite for his emancipation amounted to four hundred and thirty pounds. Christian's pocket-book was produced; and bank-notes for that sum were counted down by him on the table with as much apparent indifference as if they were so many pieces of waste paper. Mr. Solomons received his fees in addition to the amount specified: another cab was summoned; and the three gentlemen took their departure, laughing and joking in the gayest possible humour.

"Now we will go and have supper somewhere and make a night of it!" exclaimed Alexis, as the cab drove westward until more specific orders should be issued to the driver himself.

"Come to my lodgings," said Stanley; "and I can promise you something choice and good for supper."

"With all my heart!" exclaimed Christian, before Alexis could interpose; for this young gentleman would have infinitely preferred Evans's or the Cider Cellars.

The order was given to the cabman; and to Captain Stanley's lodgings in Albemarle Street did the vehicle proceed. The table was soon spread

the moment when, as the clock of Oaklands proclaimed the hour of eleven, we direct the attention of the reader thither. Silent, if not altogether motionless, sat those six persons: but all except the Queen afforded occasional though scarcely perceptible indications of either uneasiness or else of some other feeling, such as awe or suspense. Indora's large dark eyes burnt with a strong steady lustre: her red lips were slightly apart—not quivering nor moving in the least, but with their very absence of motion indicating that her thoughts were fixed and her mind intent on one special object which she had the conviction of being enabled to carry out. She did not once glance towards either of those who were seated on her right hand and on her left: she remained motionless in her throne-like seat—not with an ungraceful rigidity—but with all the natural and unstudied elegance of posture which was likewise consistent with the perfect dignity of her queenly bearing. She scarcely seemed to breathe, so statue-like was she!—for there was no tumultuous heaving nor falling of the superb bosom, so rich and so well developed in its sculptural contours. Altogether, with that magnificent and beauteous lady upon her throne—with the five figures (two masked and three veiled) on her right and left—with the funeral hangings to the walls and the sable pall spread upon the ceiling—with the white floor-carpet, giving ghastly reflection to the less than dim cathedral light that pervaded the apartment—with that powerful lustre which shone forth for a few yards from the inner room—and with the tomb-like stillness which prevailed,—it was a scene full well calculated to strike awe and terror into the soul of any one who might be brought into the presence of the royal Indora.

In a few minutes the sable drapery on one side of the room was agitated: it opened—and old Purvis, the steward, entered the apartment. He

was dressed in deep black, with a snowy white neckcloth: his look was profoundly solemn; and it was likewise with the utmost respect that he advanced towards the throne upon which Indora was seated. Sinking upon one knee, he handed a card to the Queen, saying, "May it please your Majesty, *she* whose name is thereon earnestly implores a few minutes' private audience."

Indora, glancing at the card, seemed for a moment to be much agitated; and then a look of boundless compassion appeared upon her handsome countenance—while her bosom heaved with a deep sigh.

"I will see her, Purvis," she answered:—"yes, I will see her."

Thus speaking, Indora descended from the throne; and followed the old steward from the apartment by means of the same door through which he had entered. It communicated with the spacious landing; and as it closed behind the Queen, she said to Purvis, "You have not left them together?"

"No, your Majesty," he responded: "the Duke is in the waiting-room, guarded by the Hindoos: and the Duchess is in this apartment:"—at the same time he pointed towards a door on the opposite side of the landing.

"And her Grace is alone there?" said the Queen inquiringly.

"Her Grace is alone there," rejoined the old steward. "She is profoundly afflicted—she is likewise in a state of consternation——"

"Yes—she is deeply, deeply to be pitied!" said Indora, with another sigh. "But it is impossible that her feelings can be regarded in the present case. Sad indeed is the destiny of this poor lady—fated as she is to feel the effects of all her husband's stupendous crimes!—but the hand of justice cannot remain palsied nor the interest of others be sacrificed on her account. All this, Purvis, you comprehend as well as I."

"Your Majesty has already condescended to explain that much to me," answered the old steward. "I too experience an immense sympathy for her Grace: but at the same time I know that *her* feelings and interests must now be regarded as secondary to the accomplishment of those paramount duties which I am humbly but faithfully assisting your Majesty to perform."

The Queen smiled graciously upon Purvis; and she then passed on into the room where the Duchess of Marchmont was so anxiously awaiting her presence.

This was the second time that these two ladies had met,—that royal lady and that ducal one;—and now the latter, hastening forward, threw herself at the feet of the former. The Duchess had at length become acquainted with the sovereign rank of her who on the first occasion she had only known as the Lady Indora: but it was not so much in homage to a Queen that she thus knelt, as it was in the character of a suppliant to one whom she felt to be, by some mysterious and unknown means, the arbitress of her husband's destiny, and therefore of her own.

"Rise, Duchess of Marchmont!" said the Queen, bending down to take the hands of the prostrate Lavinia; "and receive at once from my lips the assurance of my illimitable sympathy! But at the same time let me not by those words appear to encourage a hope which cannot possibly be realized——"

"Oh! then there is something very dreadful which menaces my husband!" exclaimed Lavinia, starting up from her kneeling position: "and your Majesty is invested with the power to punish him! But, Oh! madam, the most beautiful of all royal prerogatives is that of mercy; and whether your's be now exercised in strict accordance with the law, or only by virtue of the moral power which you wield and which my husband's misdeeds have given you, yet do I beseech that the sentiment of mercy will not be forgotten!"

"Let us sit down together for a few minutes, Duchess of Marchmont," said the Queen; "and we will converse:"—then having handed her Grace to a seat, Indora fixed her large dark eyes earnestly upon her countenance, and asked, "Has your ladyship the slightest suspicion of the real cause for which your husband has been brought hither?"

"My thoughts are all in confusion," replied the Duchess; "and I know not what to conjecture—what to suspect! But doubtless it is that same subject which on a former occasion led me to seek an interview with your Majesty—some deep, deep cause of offence which my husband has given you ——Alas! I fear me, the death of your Hindoo ayah Sagoonah?"

"The Duke of Marchmont has been very, very ill," interrupted the Queen, without giving any response to the observations of the Duchess; "and he has been raving in the delirium of fever. I know also that your Grace has been a faithful, a constant, and an affectionate attendant at the bedside of your husband. Tell me, therefore—did he never in those ravings give utterance to aught which might have led your Grace to suspect—— Oh! how can I put this question to a wife?—a wife too who loves her husband, notwithstanding he is so unworthy of her!"

Indora became greatly troubled; for all her most generous feelings and all her most compassionate sentiments were excited on behalf of the unfortunate lady, who, pale and careworn, full of affliction—with a heart torn by vague wild terrors, and a soul tortured by suspense—was seated all trembling by her side.

"Oh! the ravings of my husband were sometimes terrible—terrible!" exclaimed the Duchess of Marchmont; "and yet they were so incoherent—so disjointed—that I could not comprehend them. Nevertheless, I must admit that I heard enough to carry the appalling conviction in unto my mind that his conscience was sorely burdened: for otherwise no imagination could have been so shockingly excited! And there have been moments too," continued the Duchess, now shuddering with a visible horror, "when hideous fancies have flitted through my brain——But no, no!" she ejaculated, literally shaking herself in the wildness of her harrowed thoughts; "it is impossible!—it is impossible!"

"At least, my dear madam," said the Queen, in her most soothing tone, "*your* conscience is pure—and you have naught to apprehend on your own account!"

"Oh! but what happens to my husband," exclaimed Lavinia, passionately, "will redound upon me! Tell me—Oh! tell me, what means the horrible mystery of all these proceedings? No sooner

is my husband recovering from his dangerous illness—scarcely is he convalescent—when two emissaries from your Majesty present themselves at the house and demand an interview with him. They insisted upon seeing him alone: but I would not leave him—I clung to him—nothing could induce me to tear myself away from him at a moment when presentiments of danger had irresistibly seized upon my brain! Then they whispered some words in his ear: those words I could not catch—nor would he tell me what they were. But their power was talismanic, and their effects upon him were awful! Crushed and overwhelmed as if the call of doom had smitten his ear, he murmured forth his readiness to obey the summons which your Majesty had sent him through those emissaries. Then was it that I learnt for the first time that you were possessed of queenly rank; and I knew that if ever the diadem of mercy sat gracefully on the brow of any throned lady, it must be upon your's—and I resolved to accompany my husband! It was as a captive in the power of your emissaries that he was brought hither: it was as a criminal that I beheld him ere now separated from me. And here—in his own mansion, where none but he or I should command—do we seem to be aliens and strangers! Our very steward dictates to us: the domestics, assembled in the hall, look on in gloomy silence as we pass! Oh, madam! my mind is filled with horrible alarms! For heaven's sake tell me, what does it all mean?"

"It is impossible that I can give your ladyship any explanations now," responded Indora.

"Oh! did you not tell me on the former occasion when we met," exclaimed the Duchess of Marchmont,—"did you not tell me that for *my* sake would you forgive all his offences towards yourself?—did you not bid me return to my husband and assure him emphatically that it was on *my* account your pardon was accorded?"

"All this is true, lady!" answered Indora, still with the most compassionating tone and look: "but do you not remember that at the time I gave your Grace to understand there was a reservation on behalf of *another*—and that though I pardoned your husband for his misdeeds towards myself, I had not the power to acquit him of whatsoever offences he had been guilty of towards that *other?*"

"Yes, most gracious madam," replied the Duchess, anxiously, and full of suspense; "all this I remember well!. But was not that *other* to whom your majesty alluded at the time—was it not Sagoonah?"

"No," rejoined Indora. "That other to whom I alluded, and on behalf of whom I so emphatically expressed a reservation—that other for whom indeed I had no power to speak, but for whom on the contrary I was myself working—that *other*, lady"—and after a few moments' hesitation, Indora added, "that *other* was Lord Clandon!"

The countenance of the Duchess, already exceedingly pale, now became ghastly white: and she seemed as if she were about to faint. Horrible suspicions—frightful misgivings, had evidently smitten the unfortunate lady, even to the extent of almost overpowering, crushing, and prostrating her utterly—those same suspicions and those misgivings to which she had already alluded as having haunted her fancy when listening to the ravings of her husband in the delirium of his fever!

Queen Indora had purposely mentioned the name of Lord Clandon in order to prepare the Duchess somewhat for the terrible *denouement* of all the proceedings which were now in progress; and yet it wrung the heart of the generous Queen to be compelled thus to shock, harrow, and appal the soul of a lady who was already unfortunate enough—whose affliction was already so great—and who was so completely innocent in respect to every one of the misdeeds that were this night to be charged against her husband.

"I beseech you, lady," said Indora, now rising from her seat in order to put an end to the interview, "to summon all your fortitude to your aid, and to take refuge in the resignation taught by the sublime truths of that Christianity in which I believe as well as your Grace. Whatsoever is now progressing must be accomplished, as if it were the irresistible progress of destiny itself! It is no persecution devised against *your* peace:—heaven forbid! Certain circumstances are engendered by the misdeeds of men: and, alas! it too often happens in this world that innocent beings become the victims thereof. So it may be now! What is right must be asserted; and whatsoever is wrong must be proclaimed. Again I say, Duchess of Marchmont, summon all your fortitude to your aid: and it were ungenerous—it were cruel—it were even wicked on my part to abstain from giving you this warning! I must now leave you: but I will summon into your presence an amiable and excellent young lady who will do her best to soothe solace and console you."

Lavinia listened with a look of dismay, and yet with a certain expression of gratitude, to this solemnly delivered speech. It portended something dreadful in respect to her husband; and her own tremendous fears were now frightfully suggestive. She could not speak—she could not give utterance to a syllable in reply to the Queen's address: but again sinking at her feet, she took Indora's hands and pressed them to her lips, as if to implore that as much mercy might be shown to her husband as circumstances would permit her Majesty to show.

Indora stifled a sob which threatened to convulse her own bosom; and pressing the hands of the Duchess, she stooped down, kissed her forehead, and devoutly murmured, "May heaven, my afflicted friend, sustain you!"

The Queen then issued from the apartment where this most painful interview had taken place; and she found Purvis waiting for her on the landing.

"Send Miss Ashton to the Duchess," said Indora to the old steward; "and bid her remain with her Grace until her presence shall be required elsewhere. Then having done this," added Indora impressively, "let the proceedings of the tribunal at once commence!"

Purvis bowed; and then said, "May I be so bold as to ask your Majesty whether the twins have a foreknowledge of all that is about to take place?"

"No, Purvis," answered the Queen: "as little as possible has been said to them—and they are ignorant for what object they have been brought

hither. But I must not remain in conversation here: the solemn proceedings of the tribunal must commence!"

Having thus spoken, Indora returned into the vast apartment hung with black; while Purvis hurried off in another direction to execute her Majesty's orders in respect to Christina Ashton. On re-entering the state-room which had been fitted up with so much awful solemnity, and which in some respects resembled an inquisitorial scene of remoter and darker ages, Indora resumed her seat upon the throne. Nothing now remained changed in respect to the appearance of that apartment from what it was when we described it at the opening of the chapter. Upon the throne on the dais Queen Indora sat again—a veiled female and a masked man on her right—two veiled women and one masked man on her left. There too were the sable draperies on the walls—the black pall upon the ceiling—the ghastly white covering upon the floor. And still likewise was the strange mysterious light burning within that inner room the door of which stood partially open.

About five minutes had elapsed after the return of Queen Indora from her interview with the Duchess of Marchmont; and again was the sable drapery agitated on one side of the room. The door which that drapery covered had just opened—the hangings themselves parted for an instant—and the Duke of Marchmont was conducted in by the two Hindoos who had brought him in their custody from London. These Hindoos were officers in the household of the Royal Commissioners who a few weeks back had arrived from Inderabad to announce to Indora the death of her father and the intelligence that a throne awaited her.

The two Hindoos were dressed in their gorgeous uniforms, the splendour of which contrasted strongly with the sombre gloom of that awful tribunal. The Duke of Marchmont was blindfolded; and his hands were held behind him by his Hindoo guards. But as if nothing should be wanting to complete the solemnity of the whole scene, and to render it as strikingly terrible as possible to him whose eyes were about to be unbandaged that they might gaze upon it, the two guards themselves were masked. One of them had his sabre drawn in his hand, as an emblem that his royal mistress wielded a power which it would be vain for the captive criminal to dispute.

The Duke of Marchmont was conducted up to the front of the throne,—at a distance of about half-a-dozen yards from which his guards made a halt. They then unfastened the kerchief which bandaged his eyes. From the description already given of the entire scene, the reader may possibly imagine the extent of the awe-inspiring terror with which it thus suddenly burst upon Marchmont's view. Utterly unconscious was he beforehand of the spectacle that his gaze was thus to encounter; and when we consider what this spectacle was, and likewise bear in mind that the Duke of Marchmont's conscience was stained with countless crimes, it will require but little effort of the imagination for the reader to conceive the effect produced upon him. Having only within the last few days risen from a bed of sickness—still suffering physically, and incessantly tortured by all the wild apprehensions which had originally thrown him on the couch of fever—the Duke of Marchmont was but the shadow of his former self. So emaciated was his form that his garments appeared to hang upon him as if they had been made for another person: his countenance was thin, wan, and ghastly: his eyes were sunken in their sockets, the blueish tint of which enhanced the horrible aspect of their cavernous depths. Were it not that he was prepared for something dreadful, he could not possibly have sustained the shock which the appearance of the tribunal produced upon him as the bandage fell from his eyes.

He staggered, and would have fallen were it not that his guards sustained him. He beheld Queen Indora seated upon that throne; and it seemed to his appalled fancy that her's was now a terrible beauty, and that there was the aspect of the avenging Nemesis in her majestic looks. He glanced to her right—he glanced to her left: who were those veiled and masked figures? His gaze wandered elsewhere: what meant that light streaming forth from the inner room? what mysteries or what horrors were concealed by that open door? He glanced upon his guards: they were now masked—although he had previously seen their countenances when they had appeared at his mansion in Belgrave Square to summon him in Queen Indora's name to Oaklands. Oh! well indeed had all her Majesty's arrangements been combined to produce the most awful effects on the Duke of Marchmont's guilty soul!

It often happens that when a man who has for some time foreseen the wreck of fame, fortune, rank, and safety, is suddenly brought face to face with the tremendous convulsion itself, the courage of utter desperation seizes upon him. And thus was it with the Duke of Marchmont. All in a moment the most powerful revulsion of feelings took place within him; and he clutched at the wild hope that he might yet save himself by presenting a bold front to this tribunal in the presence of which he stood. And then, too, perhaps the thought struck him that the tribunal was only so formed in order to terrify him into confessions and extort from him avowals without which no good case could be made out against him. Perhaps likewise he fancied that there might be an inclination in another quarter to spare him as much as possible, and that his own brother was chivalrous enough to make the most fearful self-sacrifice that man could possibly make for the purpose of avoiding a terrific exposure that should startle the whole world. For if it were not so—and if these conjectures were not fraught with reasons for hope—why should all those proceedings be arrayed in mystery and darkness against him? why should not everything have been left to the regular course of human justice and to the development of legitimate process in the public tribunals?

But whatever were the thoughts, the calculations, the conjectures, or the hopes of the Duke of Marchmont,—certain it is that he suddenly assumed a different bearing from that which he had at first worn. He summoned all his effrontery to his aid: desperation's self nerved him to play a neck-or-nothing game,—to listen to all that might be charged against him—to ascertain precisely in what circumstances he was placed—to envisage the

perils which surrounded him—and then to act, as circumstances should direct, either with grovelling entreaty or with lofty defiance. But Queen Indora had foreseen that through this phase the mind of the Duke of Marchmont would pass; and therefore had she spared nothing in her arrangements which was calculated to sustain the most awe-inspiring effects, and to strike him as it were blow upon blow, each one more powerful than its predecessor.

CHAPTER CXLV.

THE WITNESSES.

THE Queen, fathoming everything that was passing in the mind of the criminal who now stood in her presence, suffered several minutes to elapse before she opened the proceedings by word of mouth. At length she spoke. It was in a slow, clear, measured voice—sufficiently cold to convey an impression of the implacable sternness of justice—and yet not deviating from the feminine harmony which became her sex and her queenly station.

"Prisoner," she said, "you have been summoned by the force of circumstances before a tribunal which, though not constituted according to the laws of your country, nevertheless wields a power which you cannot possibly defy. I know full well all the hopes that you are now entertaining: but they will be defeated! Rest assured that I should not have undertaken a task in the accomplishment of which there was the slightest scintillation of doubt. Your own conscience must tell you whether you have in your lifetime perpetrated deeds that would render you amenable to any human tribunal; and if so, then are you amenable to this! Man of many crimes, the hour of retribution is come—and Providence has ordained that the tangled web which you yourself have woven by your countless iniquities, should this night close in finally around you!"

The Duke of Marchmont thought for a moment of making a reply: but a second reflection bade him remain faithful to the policy of hearing all that could be alleged against him: for he had by this time begun to suspect who most of the witnesses were, that either veiled or masked were arrayed against him upon the platform.

"Your crimes, prisoner," continued Queen Indora, "are now about to experience a terrible revival in your memory—even if that memory could ever have lost sight of them while conscience fed the eternal lamp which sheds its light in the desecrated sanctuary of your soul. As a train of spectres passes through the diseased imagination, so shall your iniquities, as well as their accomplices, their agents, or their victims, be presented in vivid reality to your view. First let me speak of that amiable and excellent wife of yours—the loving and affectionate Lavinia—whom by the basest of conspiracies you sought to brand with a charge as infamous as it was false, and to sully her purity in order that you might obtain a ground for her repudiation. This, which was the lightest of *your* misdeeds, would for any other man be crushing and overwhelming! And next I will speak to you of your black turpitude towards a young woman whose character was her only fortune—and against whom, by aid of opiate drugs, you perpetrated the foulest and most infamous outrage. Behold! she is here!—she who is alike a witness ready to testify of your black designs against your wife, and of your dark satanic villany against herself!"

Thus speaking, Indora pointed towards the veiled female who sat upon her right hand: the veil was thrown off—and the countenance of Amy Sutton was revealed. Looks of malignant hatred and fiend-like revenge were those which this injured young woman bent upon the Duke of Marchmont; and he recoiled in horror therefrom—not so much because the looks themselves touched a remorseful chord in his conscience, as because it struck him that the victim of his lust was there to gloat over his final undoing and utter fall.

"And now I would address you as a man," continued Queen Indora, "who endeavoured to suborn others to the execution of your villanous purposes—as one who lavished gold by thousands to induce a needy spendthrift to wield the bravo's dagger against my own life! Here is a deed which, if proclaimed to the world, would bring you before a tribunal constituted on a basis different from this one! There sits the man who can testify how he was thus suborned, and who on a previous occasion had lent his aid in your diabolical machinations against your own wife!"

While giving utterance to this last sentence, Queen Indora's extended arm pointed towards the masked individual who sat next to Amy Sutton, on the right hand of the throne; and when that individual took off his mask, he revealed the countenance of Wilson Stanhope. His countenance expressed a species of terror as if the man himself entertained but a vague idea of how all these proceedings would terminate, and was therefore by no means assured that exposure to the whole world would not ensue and that condign punishment would not overtake himself.

"And now I will speak to you," continued Queen Indora, "of a darker crime than even those to which I have alluded,—a crime which, when designed by you, was not altogether frustrated by circumstances—but which was so far carried into effect that it struck a fellow-creature, though *not* the one whom it was meant to strike: namely, myself! Prisoner, it was at your instigation that the assassin-blow was dealt in the garden of my villa-residence: and here is a witness who can testify to the discourse which subsequently took place between yourself and the agent of your iniquity!"

Thus speaking, Queen Indora made a sign for the female on her left hand, to remove the veil which covered her countenance; and when this was done, the Duke beheld Mrs. Oxenden. He was not altogether without a suspicion that she indeed was the veiled female who sat in that place: but when the suspicion was turned into certainty, he felt a horrible tightening at the heart—for it seemed to him as if even those whom his gold had maintained in luxury, were arraying themselves against him. This idea is always a harrowing one for the individual who feels that the ground is slipping away beneath his feet: because it is frightfully ominous of the crowning catastrophe. Thus the presence of Mrs. Oxenden

there—his own pensioned mistress—was indeed another blow that struck upon the heart of the Duke of Marchmont more severely than the two preceding ones dealt through the medium of Amy Sutton and Wilson Stanhope.

"But if that testimony be not sufficient," continued Queen Indora, after a pause of more than a minute, "there is one here present who can give ampler evidence. That man has confessed everything; and if it be needful, the world may know how *you*, prisoner, suborned him to deal the assassin-blow which, though intended for myself, nevertheless smote the bosom of the unfortunate Sagoonah. He can tell likewise how you visited him in his dungeon-cell, when he was a captive in the hands of justice—and how you furnished him the means of effecting his escape."

The Burker, who was seated next to Mrs. Oxenden, gave a sort of low subdued growl as he removed the mask and revealed his hideous countenance to the Duke. The nobleman had already recognised him—but had scarcely fancied that he could have told so much; and therefore it was indeed another and severer blow which thus struck the guilty Marchmont.

"And now," continued Queen Indora, "for the last of these witnesses who in *this* place"—and she emphasised the word printed in italic—"may be specified as one who can bear fearful evidence against you. In more than one instance has she been the agent and accomplice of your iniquities. It was by her insidious representations that my unfortunate dependant Sagoonah, who is now no more, was led to meditate murder in respect to myself. Yes, prisoner—you see that your crimes in all their details and phases are well known to me! That woman—the only one who now remains veiled—has borne testimony against you, as the rest have already borne it. But she has spoken of things relating to which these others who are present have not been enabled to speak. Do you remember that one evening you by appointment met this man"—and the Queen pointed towards the Burker—"in a lane near a certain villa on Brixton Hill? Do you remember likewise that angry words took place between yourself and that man—that he demanded more of you than you chose to give—that you drew forth your purse to bestow upon him a portion of its contents—but that he, being resolved to possess himself of the whole, felled you from your horse? You see that *he* at least has maintained no reserve in respect to anything that concerns you! Nor has that woman. Do you recollect, prisoner, I will proceed to ask, that you were borne to the villa unto which I have already alluded, and that for some while you remained there insensible? Yes—you recollect all this! But you have yet to learn, prisoner, that in the first moments of your reviving consciousness you suffered words to escape your lips—or rather they involuntarily flowed from the very fountains of your troubled conscience; and those words, prisoner, were heard by Madame Angelique, who was in attendance upon you. Fearful indeed were those words—and to a fearful crime they pointed! If you doubt me, ask that witness herself! She will tell the truth."

Thus speaking, Queen Indora made a sign for the woman whom she indicated to throw back her veil: but the guilty Duke of Marchmont had already more than suspected who she was; and therefore he was not surprised when he beheld the countenance of Madame Angelique. But if he were not surprised, he was nevertheless stricken another blow; and this was far the severest of all: for Queen Indora's language had pointed towards that *other* crime which was the most terrible of the many that blackened his conscience, as it was the one likewise concerning which he had hoped that there would be the greatest difficulty in putting forward any substantial proof. He now appeared to be utterly unmanned: the bold hardihood that he had assumed, forsook him: every remnant of the air of defiance adopted at the outset vanished away; and he was on the very point of sinking on his knees and imploring mercy.

But again did a thought strike him: again did the very desperation of his circumstances nerve him with a preternatural courage. Therefore, quick as lightning, was the bold effrontery assumed again; and the air of defiance was adopted. It was still neck-or-nothing with this man who felt that he stood upon a mine, for the explosion of which there were a thousand chances against only *one* that he might possibly escape.

"Queen Indora," he said, now breaking silence for the first time, and endeavouring to throw a tincture of scorn into his accents, "you have marshalled against me an array of witnesses which constitute a goodly company to sit by the side of your Majesty. Commencing on the right hand, there is a notorious debauchee—an unprincipled profligate, whose relations have long cast him off, and whom society has repudiated—a man who, even according to your own account, has ever been willing to sell himself for gold. You are rich, Queen Indora—the wealth of the wealthiest portion of the Indies is at your disposal—and perhaps therefore you have well paid that man for his present services; and in proportion to the reward given him is his zeal to bear false testimony against me."

"If ever I told the truth in my life, my Lord Duke of Marchmont," exclaimed Wilson Stanhope, "it shall be told against you now, if her Majesty command me to speak out!"

"Let us hear the prisoner to the end," said Queen Indora, in the cold firm voice of authority.

"Next to your Majesty," continued the Duke of Marchmont, "sits a female who admits that she has lost her virtue, and that she has no claim to rank amongst the modest of her sex. It is easy for one who has been a willing paramour, to turn round upon him whom in the world's canting language she calls her seducer; and disappointed because I have not lavished gold upon her and established her in a palatial mansion as my acknowledged mistress, she is ready in her vindictive spirit to heap false calumnies upon my head."

"Villain that you are!" exclaimed Amy Sutton, her cheeks flushing with rage and indignation, and her eyes flashing fire; "you know that I rejected your overtures with scorn and contempt—and that you triumphed over me by the basest of satanic arts! But heaven be thanked, the day of your doom is arrived—and I am present to witness your downfall!"

"Let the prisoner proceed," said Queen Indora,

again speaking in the voice of coldly calm authority.

"Turning to your Majesty's left hand," continued Marchmont, "I behold seated next to you a woman who lives upon her profligacy: and think you for a moment that the word of such a wretch would have the slightest weight with a jury of my countrymen in a legitimate Court of Justice? Let her proclaim her antecedents—let her character be unmasked as her face has ere now been unveiled; and who would attach the remotest credence to a syllable flowing from such polluted lips?"

"It is easy to use harsh epithets, my lord," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, her dark eyes flashing lightning even more vivid than those which the eyes of Amy Sutton had shot forth: "but abuse is not argument—and the testimony against you would be already overwhelming, were you not borne up by that very desperation which compels you to struggle unto the last!"

"As for the villain who is seated next," continued the Duke, his eyes now settling upon the Burker, "the gaol yawns for him; and it were an insult to any jury in this country to produce the testimony of such a man!"

"If it wasn't for such men as you, my lord," growled the Burker, "there would be fewer such men as me! Your day is gone by—and it's of no use your making long speeches and abusing them as you was accustomed to use as your tools."

"As for Madame Angelique," continued the Duke of Marchmont, who affected to turn away with loathing and disgust from the fierce regards of the Burker,—"as for Madame Angelique, *her* character befits her to take her place in this company with which your Majesty has chosen to surround yourself. The whole career of that vile Frenchwoman has been one of hardened iniquity; and she has accumulated wealth by means the most degrading, the most disgusting, the most abominable! Is it such testimony as hers that can all in a moment ruin the character of a nobleman bearing one of the proudest of British titles? Place that woman in a witness-box, and any judge will indignantly command her to stand down!—no jury would listen to her!"

"And yet, bad as I may have been," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "I have had the honour of reckoning the Duke of Marchmont among my most intimate friends!"

"I will now address myself to your Majesty," proceeded the Duke, who chose to have the appearance of disdaining to bandy a word with Madame Angelique. "I have spoken unreservedly of the characters of your witnesses; and your Majesty's own good sense must tell you that I have spoken only too truly. I will not pretend to fathom the purposes which you may have in view: but whatever they may be, you must confess by this time that you have failed in carrying them out. That I have been gay—perhaps dissipated,—that I have been a man of pleasure—all this it is not worth my while to deny: but on the other hand these things assuredly concern not yourself. That Mrs. Oxenden has been my mistress—that Amy Sutton has received me in her arms—or that my visits have been paid to the house of Madame Angelique, are facts which I might readily have admitted without the necessity of this dark parade and solemn ordeal. That my purse has been open to Mr. Stanhope—and that I have been plundered as well as personally maltreated by that villain who sits on your Majesty's left hand—are likewise facts. But that I have ever been their suborner or the instigator of their iniquities, is something too monstrous for belief. That I, so proudly placed, should have condescended to such folly, is repugnant to your Majesty's good sense. You see, Queen Indora, that I am addressing you with the respect that is due to your sex and to your rank. But let me warn your Majesty that it is no light deed on your part to adopt all these proceedings against an Englishman, however humble his rank might be: but when you reflect what I am—what *my* rank is—and that I am even exempt from the jurisdiction of the ordinary tribunals of my country—and if accused of misdeeds, can be tried only by my peers—you cannot shut out from yourself the fact that you have taken a most serious step in subjecting me to an ordeal which can end in naught. Therefore I demand that your Majesty at once restores me to that freedom which these myrmidons of your's"—and he glanced towards the Hindoos—"have so grossly violated."

As the reader may suppose, it cost the Duke of Marchmont no mean effort to maintain the demeanour which corresponded with the language that thus flowed from his lips, and which was so completely at variance with that inward consciousness of a thousand crimes that he experienced: but it was still by the very desperation of his circumstances that he was supported; and he was in a condition of the most awful suspense as to what might be coming next. Queen Indora listened to him with all that calm attention which a righteous judge bestows upon a captive who is accused: there was nothing however in her look nor bearing to indicate that his words had produced any effect upon her, either to make her think less than beforehand of the amount of evidence brought to bear against him, or to feel uneasy at the responsibility of the position in which she had placed herself. The Duke of Marchmont anxiously and eagerly watched to see what the effect of his speech might be; and more deeply sank his heart within him while he noticed how coldly firm and resolutely imperturbable were Queen Indora's looks. And then, too, the door of that inner chamber still stood half open; and the strong light was still shining forth; and there was a secret voice within the Duke's guilty soul, telling him that what he thus observed related to some fresh phase in the proceedings that were now in progress—but what it might be he could not possibly conjecture.

"I have heard you with attention, prisoner," said the Queen; "but it is unnecessary for me to offer the slightest comment upon your speech. Follow me."

She descended from her throne—grace and dignity in her movements—but a deep solemnity investing her as with a garment. Slowly she proceeded towards that half-open door—the Duke of Marchmont mechanically following. The Hindoo guards did not now accompany him: the witnesses remained stationary in their seats upon the dais. The Queen entered first into the room to which we have so often alluded; and the moment the Duke of Marchmont reached the threshold he be-

held a spectacle which suddenly transfixed him with mingled awe, wonderment, and horror.

It was a much smaller room than that which had been fitted up for the tribunal: but the walls were likewise hung with black draperies. Upon a couch the corpse of Sagoonah was laid out. She seemed as if she were only sleeping—so serene was her aspect, and so completely was the freshness of the body preserved. There was in the atmosphere a perfume of drugs, which at once indicated the embalming process that had been adopted to ensure that preservation. A cap of snowy whiteness completely concealed the dead ayah's coal-black hair: her naked arms, stretched at her sides—not stiffly, but in a life-like manner—had rich bracelets upon them. Very beautiful appeared that corpse,—seeming as if the breath of life had only just passed out of it, and as if it had been surrendered up without a struggle: for immediately after the cold hand of death had touched Sagoonah, her features had settled down into that serenity which they now wore. Indeed, she looked not as if she were dead—but only sleeping after a severe indisposition which had spread an uniform pallor upon the natural duskiness of her complexion.

Four wax candles, as tall as those tapers which are seen on Catholic altars, shed their light upon the corpse, and produced that effulgence which streamed forth from the half-open door into the room fitted up as the tribunal. Powerful was the lustre, and solemnly grand was the effect thereof upon the body. It brought out the form of the dead Sagoonah into the strongest relief: it gave the animation of life to the skin; and it played upon her features as if they themselves were slightly moving with the presence of existence.

Amidst all the wildest conjectures which the Duke of Marchmont might have hazarded relative to the contents of this room, no possible surmise could have led him to anticipate the spectacle which he thus beheld. As we have said, therefore, he stood transfixed with mingled awe, wonderment, and horror: for it seemed as if death itself were now invoked to bear some kind of evidence against him. For upwards of a minute did Queen Indora suffer the scene to produce its fullest effect upon the prisoner; and then in a tone of authority she bade him advance further into the room. He obeyed her: she closed the door; and he was now alone with that royal lady and with the corpse of Sagoonah.

"My lord," said the Queen, in a voice that was low and most solemnly impressive, "you are not altogether innocent in respect to the causes which led to the premature death of the hapless Sagoonah. I will not however deny that her mind was already in a morbid state when you employed the vile Frenchwoman to become her temptress, and instigate her to the foulest deeds. Had it not been for this conduct on your part, Sagoonah might have lived. But step by step was she led on to that fearful climax which was the accomplishment of her doom. It was retribution that she met! The means which she had adopted to take my life at the instigation of your agent, became the source of her own death. The tragedy was a horrible one; and I do not hesitate to proclaim that Sagoonah was one of your victims. Oh! if you had never done aught but this, it were sufficient to fill your soul with a remorse that never in this life would be appeased! But greater still have been your crimes; and, as I ere now proclaimed, this is the hour in which they are all to be made known. Prisoner, look upon that corpse! It is the corpse of her who in the madness of feelings and passions which I shall not pause to describe, gave up your own brother to the dungeon-cell which he now tenants."

"My brother!" murmured the Duke of Marchmont, staggering at the words, as if they touched a chord which vibrated most painfully to his heart's core.

"Yes—your brother!" continued Queen Indora and now she bent the look of an avenging Nemesis upon the Duke of Marchmont. "Oh! think you that the proceedings of this night were ended when in the adjoining room I enumerated all your minor crimes,—crimes which though great in themselves, were nevertheless nothing to that which has yet to be proclaimed! And yet even *that* too was darkly hinted at—but not so darkly that it failed to touch your conscience! Do you not perceive that the finger of heaven has manifested itself in all the incidents and occurrences which have been hurrying you on towards the catastrophe? By the agent of your own villany were you stricken down, so that in the first moments of returning consciousness you might betray to that vile Frenchwoman—*another* agent of your iniquities—the tremendous secret which for nearly twenty years must have sat like a hideous nightmare upon your soul!"

It would be impossible to describe the ghastly horror which the countenance of the guilty Marchmont displayed, while Queen Indora was thus addressing him. He trembled from head to foot with a series of visible shudderings: the perspiration burst forth cold and clammy upon his brow: all his features were convulsed: it seemed as if he were about to fall down and writhe in fearfullest agony like a stricken serpent.

"But even without the testimony of that Frenchwoman," continued Indora, "was there a sufficiency of accumulated proofs to brand you with the full stigma of your enormous guilt. Do you doubt me? No!—you cannot! Yet step by step shall you pass through this ordeal. Come with me."

The Queen drew aside the sable drapery at the end of the room facing the door by which she and the Duke had entered from the tribunal; and another door enabled them to emerge upon the landing. This Indora traversed,—still followed by the Duke, who mechanically dragged himself along, but in a state of mind that it were impossible to describe. If ever a man felt that hell might be foretasted upon earth, and that it was possible to pass through a series of worldly horrors sufficient to prepare the soul for the torments of hereafter,—that man was the Duke of Marchmont. All his energies seemed now paralysed: he was obeying the Queen only as an automaton might have acted: his faculties were growing so numbed under the influence of intensest, most harrowing horror, that had she, being immortal or invulnerable, led the way into a fiery furnace, that wretched man would perforce have unconsciously and mechanically followed her.

She opened a door on the opposite side of the landing; and she conducted him into a little room

of which he seemed only to have a dim recollection, though nothing in this apartment was changed in respect to its appointments as he himself had for years known them. But, as we have already intimated, his thoughts were falling fast into confusion—not exactly with the madness of excitement, but with the stupor of an overwhelming consternation—a crushing dismay—a paralysing horror.

In this room to which Queen Indora now conducted the Duke of Marchmont, Mr. Armytage was seated. Candles were burning upon the table: Zoe's father was excessively pale—but there was a certain air of resolution in his looks, as if he knew beforehand what duty he had to perform, and was determined to accomplish it. He rose from his seat on the appearance of Indora, to whom he bowed with the profoundest respect. He then glanced at the Duke of Marchmont; and an expression passed over his features as if he were at the moment saying to himself, "The hour of that man is come!"

Indora closed the door; and without taking a seat, she at once said to Zoe's father, "Your name is not Armytage——it is Travers?"

"I have already admitted as much to your Majesty," replied the individual thus addressed; and his voice as well as his manner indicated the deepest respect towards that Sovereign lady.

The Duke of Marchmont now appeared to rally himself slightly for a moment; and he bent upon Travers a look of the most imploring entreaty: but Zoe's father seemed not to notice it.

"You were once the valet of this person?" continued Queen Indora, glancing for an instant at the Duke of Marchmont; "and you were at Oaklands when several long years ago an awful tragedy took place?"

"I was so, your Majesty," responded Travers: and a moan came forth from the throat of the wretched Marchmont.

"You remember the night when the late Duke of Marchmont was murdered?" continued Indora: "and you recollect that the faithful dog—no doubt in the attempt to save his beloved master from the assassin-blow, or else to punish him who dealt it—had torn off a piece of the garment worn at the time by that assassin?"

"All this I recollect, madam," replied Travers.

"Enough! enough!" wildly ejaculated Marchmont; and his eyes glared in their cavernous sockets. "Why revive the horrors of that night? Oh, madam! who are you that you have come as an avengeress?"

"I am here to proclaim innocence and to expose guilt," was the solemn answer which the Queen gave in interruption of the Duke's wild speech. "Travers, reply to me,—reply to me now as truthfully as you have previously made the confession! From whose garment was that piece rent off which the faithful dog bore in its mouth?"

"It was his!" responded Travers: and he pointed to Marchmont.

Hollow and dreadful was the moan which came slowly forth from the lips of the criminal: a dizziness spread itself before his vision; and he would probably have fainted, had not Queen Indora suddenly laid her hand lightly upon his arm, saying, "Come with me."

She opened an inner door; and Marchmont followed her. Another room was entered. This also was unchanged as to its usual appointments; and lights were burning there. Christian and Christina Ashton rose from their seats as the Queen entered: they were both very pale with suspense; for they knew that something was to happen which intimately regarded themselves—though they were utterly unconscious of what this might be. The Duke did not appear to take particular notice of them: his energies were again palsied—he again felt as if he were walking in a dream!

The Queen closed the door of this room, into which Armytage had not followed herself and Marchmont; and without an instant's delay, she snatched up an object which lay in a recess. This object gleamed bright across the vision of the wretched nobleman; and a cry of horror burst from his lips as he recognised it. It was a dagger,—that same dagger which has before been so often mentioned in the pages of our narrative.

"Behold," exclaimed Indora, as she raised the weapon in her right arm, while her form appeared to dilate, and her countenance assumed the expression of an avenging goddess,—"behold the dagger with which you took the life of your uncle!"—then pointing towards the twins with her left hand, she added, almost in the same breath, "And there behold the children of your murdered victim! In this youth you may see the rightful Duke of Marchmont!"

"O God!" moaned the wretched murderer: and overwhelmed by fearfullest horror, he sank upon his knees, while the twins clung to each other in wildest astonishment at the words which they had just heard from the lips of Queen Indora.

CHAPTER CXLVI.

CLOSE OF THE TRIBUNAL.

THE five witnesses had remained in their seats upon the dais in the large apartment, hung with black, which had served as the tribunal. The two Hindoo guards had likewise continued in that room, mute and motionless: but their presence was sufficiently indicative of the inutility of any attempt being made to escape on the part of any of those witnesses whose own consciences might have excited apprehensions respecting what was to follow. The door communicating with the room in which Sagoonah's corpse was laid out, had been closed almost immediately after Indora led the prisoner thither; and thus that portion of the larger apartment was now involved in the same semi-obscurity that prevailed elsewhere. The black drapery covered that door which had recently stood half open: solemnly awful continued to be the aspect of the tribunal.

Presently, after nearly an hour's absence, Queen Indora returned. She came back alone: the prisoner was no longer with her. Her countenance was exceedingly pale—even more so than it was ere she quitted that apartment: for her feelings had been most powerfully wrought—and if she had experienced much satisfaction in successfully carrying out all her purposes, she had likewise felt much pain at the various details of their execution. Slowly she walked; and once more she ascended the throne. She did not immediately speak: a dead silence still prevailed for a few minutes, while all the witnesses contemplated her with anxiety and suspense. At length she broke that silence.

"The solemn object for which this tribunal was constituted," she said, "has been achieved; and by the merciful assistance of heaven I have become the instrument of accomplishing signal deeds this night. Know ye all who listen to me, that Bertram Vivian, now a prisoner in a felon's gaol in London, is innocent of that foul crime of murder which is charged against him, and under the imputation of which his good name has suffered for so many, many long years! It was not by *his* hand that his late uncle perished: the hand which dealt the assassin-blow was that of him who has ever since usurped the title of Duke of Marchmont!"

To Madame Angelique this fact was previously known: by Wilson Stanhope it had been for some time more than half suspected: Mrs. Oxenden, Amy Sutton, and the Burker were likewise but little astonished to hear the announcement that was just made.

"Yes," continued Queen Indora, "innocence is made apparent and guilt is exposed—the usurper is dispossessed of the title which he had so long fraudulently borne—and his ducal coronet will henceforth be worn by him to whom it descends as a lawful heritage. I allude not to Bertram Vivian. Most of you, if not all, are acquainted with the name of Christian Ashton; and that excellent, high-minded, well-principled youth is now Duke of Marchmont!"

Well as the listeners were prepared for the previous announcement,—yet utterly unexpected by them was the intelligence that had just fallen

upon their ears. Astonishment was depicted upon their countenances: but there was at least one amongst them who was rejoiced at the good fortune of our young hero — and this was Amy Sutton.

"It now only remains for me," continued Queen Indora, "to announce my intentious to some who are here present, and to address a few parting words to the others. For the remainder of this night you will all be reconsigned to the places which you have respectively occupied since you became the inmates of Oaklands; and to-morrow you will all individually depart hence. Let me hope that the solemn scene which *you*, Mr. Stanhope, have this night beheld, will have upon you a salutary effect—and that henceforth you will strive by some honourable means to earn your livelihood, instead of selling yourself as the instrument of wrong-doing and crime, for patrician gold. That your hand is not stained with murder's blood, must rather be attributed to accidental circumstances than to a positive absence of a most criminal readiness on your part: for on the night when you drove your bargain with him who *then* bore the title of Duke of Marchmont, every syllable that passed between you was heard by Bertram Vivian; and it was *his* appearance at the casement behind the chair in which you were seated, that produced so tremendous an effect upon that criminal. To you, however, Mr. Stanhope, I need say no more—unless it be to repeat my earnest hope that all you have this night witnessed may have its salutary influence upon you. From these things learn that though wickedness may prosper for a time, yet that in the end this prosperity is certain to turn into the bitterest adversity."

The Queen paused for a few moments—while Wilson Stanhope, hanging down his head, seemed to experience all the effect which her impressive words were intended to convey.

"Amy Sutton," resumed the Queen, now addressing this young woman in a kind and compassionating tone, "you have been rendered the victim of a villain, and if your soul has cherished a poignant feeling of vengeance against him it is impossible to blame you. You have now witnessed his downfall; and that feeling must be thereby appeased. In this native land of your's it is scarcely probable that you could henceforth experience happiness. In a short time I shall return to my own country; and I propose that you should follow me thither. I offer you about my own person a situation of confidence and emolument; and your welfare shall be in my charge. Your sister may accompany you if you desire it, and if you think that by removing her from the scene of those temptations which have proved fatal to her honour, she will be led to repentance and to a better course of life. To my person, however, she cannot be attached: but when I reach the capital city of my own kingdom, I will place her in some position that may afford her the opportunity of eating the bread of honest industry. The frail and erring Marion was yesterday removed from the house in which she has been dwelling in dishonour; and she is now the occupant of a humbler home, where you may join her until the period for my departure to my own native clime shall arrive."

Amy Sutton threw herself at the feet of Queen Indora, whose hand she pressed in gratitude to her lips; and she thankfully accepted all the propositions which had just been made.

"To you, Mrs. Oxenden," continued the Queen, "I can have but little to say—indeed nothing more than to reiterate the hope which I have expressed to Mr. Stanhope that the scene of this night may have a beneficial influence upon you. You will be restored to freedom: to-morrow you will go forth into the world again; and if you be wise you will endeavour by the respectability of your future career to make as much atonement as possible for your past misdeeds. The young man on whom you have been lavishing the gold which you received as the price of your own infamy, has been wounded in a duel which he himself provoked: but his injury was slight—and no disagreeable consequences will ensue. On the contrary, that incident has been productive of beneficial results for Alexis Oliver. He has been made to feel the degradation of the position in which he was living with you: he is reconciled to his family; and opportunities will be afforded him of pursuing an honourable career. You must not therefore hope that the object of your infatuation will be restored to you;—and now once again do I express the hope that your own conduct will experience an alteration for the better."

Mrs. Oxenden listened with a subdued sullenness to the speech which thus flowed from Queen Indora's lips; and perhaps she would have given some insolent reply if she had dared. But she was in awe of that illustrious lady who exercised the power as well as manifested the inclination to reward or to punish: though as for penitence, Mrs. Oxenden possessed not a heart that was susceptible of the influences which might lead to such contrition.

"As for you, man of many crimes," proceeded Indora, now addressing herself to the Burker, "it were an outrage against society to leave you without chastisement. If you were handed over to the grasp of your country's law, your life would be forfeited, and you would expiate on the scaffold the numerous iniquities of which you have been guilty. In my estimation, however, the punishment of death is odious; and I hold the opinion that the great criminal should be treated as a ferocious beast, to be confined within bars that he may not follow the bent of his brutal bloodthirsty instincts. It is my purpose to transport you with the least possible delay to my own native country; and there you will be confined in a fortress for the remainder of your life. In pronouncing this punishment, I must remind you that you have to congratulate yourself on escaping that doom which would be yours if you were to be subjected to the ordeal of British justice."

The Burker made no reply: but his ferocious countenance expressed the utmost satisfactiou at the intelligence that he was to be dealt with in a manner that would leave him in possession of life.

"You, vile woman," proceeded Queen Indora, now addressing herself to Madame Angelique, "have committed crimes which cannot be left unpunished. If not a murderess, in fact, you have been so in heart: for deliberately and in cold blood did you instigate the unfortunate Sagoonah to make attempts upon my life. You have amassed a fortune by a career of infamy; and you shall

not be left in the enjoyment of it. To-morrow, before you are restored to freedom, must you bequeath nine-tenths of your ill-gotten riches to the charitable institutions of the British metropolis; and on this condition only shall you be liberated. If you refuse, the law shall take cognizance of your crimes—the penalty of which will be transportation to a distant settlement!"

Madame Angelique began to weep, moan, and lament: but Queen Indora remained unmoved by the vile woman's grief.

"You, Mr. Stanhope—and you, Mrs. Oxenden," resumed her Majesty, "have sufficient reasons to maintain a profound secrecy in respect to the transactions of this night. As for that man there"—thus alluding to the Burker—"care will be taken that he shall have no opportunity of revealing in this country whatsoever he may have seen or heard within these walls. I know," continued Indora, now again fixing her eyes on Madame Angelique, "that in passing sentence upon *you*, I have usurped an authority derived only from the law of morality and not from the law of this country's code: but you will not dare to proclaim to the world this incident of the night's transactions. And with regard to all the rest, you will for your own sake observe a similar secrecy: for remember that though you may cease to be my prisoner, you will not cease to be amenable to the law for your past crimes!"

Having thus spoken, Queen Indora descended from the throne, and issued from the apartment. Immediately afterwards Purvis, accompanied by several domestics of the household, entered that room. The two Hindoo guards conducted the Burker to a subterranean place, in which he had been confined ever since he became a captive at Oaklands: the domestics led off Mrs. Oxenden, Madame Angelique, and Wilson Stanhope to the chambers which they respectively occupied: but no such *surveillance* was necessary in regard to Amy Sutton.

The Queen, on leaving the tribunal, proceeded to that room where the usurper Duke of Marchmont had been confronted with Travers—or Armytage, as we had better continue to call him, inasmuch as he preserved his assumed denomination. On the entrance of Indora, Armytage rose from his seat, and made a profound obeisance.

"Every promise which has been held out to you," said her Majesty, "shall be faithfully kept. The wretched criminal whose gold succeeded in bribing you to silence in respect to his guilt, has confessed his enormous crime. But you have now to learn that there was lawful issue from the marriage of the late Duke and Duchess; and that amiable brother and sister whom you have so often seen at your daughter's house, are the twin offspring of that marriage."

Nothing could exceed the astonishment of Armytage on hearing this intelligence; and when the first sense of wonderment was passed, he clasped his hands, exclaiming, "Oh! how will they ever forgive me for having kept a secret the revelation of which might long ago have given them their rights?"

"No," answered the Queen: "that revelation would merely have proved the usurping Duke's guilt and the innocence of Bertram Vivian. But not until very lately was it known that Christian and Christina Ashton were the offspring of the ducal house of Marchmont. On them, therefore, your long-maintained silence in respect to the real murderer's crime has wrought no injury. It is the pardon of Bertram Vivian which you have to ask; and that forgiveness will be accorded. The results of my plans have been such that a complete exposure of all the details of the past will be avoided; and your name need not be mentioned in a manner to make your amiable daughter blush for it. She need never know that you have for years been cognizant of the great guilt of him who has this night been led to confess everything. And if so much care has been taken in respect to your reputation, it is not for your own sake—but it is for the sake of your amiable Zoe, whom Christina loves so well! To-morrow you will be restored to freedom; and may the rest of your life be passed in a manner to be contemplated with satisfaction. You go forth into the world again as a man freed from debt—I may say as a rich man. Your daughter's fortune, which you had squandered, is replaced: you will not have to blush nor lament when you again meet her. It will be your own fault if you do not henceforth live in comfort and prosperity; and should you by renewed speculations reduce yourself to distress, you must not hope that a helping hand will again be stretched out to save you."

Armytage fell at the Queen's feet, pouring forth his gratitude for her kindness, and vehemently protesting that his experiences of speculation had been far too bitter not to afford a lesson that he would never forget.

Indora issued from that room; and on the landing she met Mr. Coleman, the solicitor, who was just descending the staircase leading to the floor above. He held in his hand a folded document; and presenting it to the Queen, he said, "Madam, I have the pleasure of placing in your hands this complete confession of the dying criminal."

Indora took the paper; and opening it, she glanced at the signature, which was tremulously written. The names of Mr. Coleman, a physician, and of Purvis, the steward, were appended as those of the witnesses. That document was the proof of Bertram Vivian's innocence. The Queen's aim was now accomplished: the hope which had long inspired her was fulfilled: the object for which she had toiled, was achieved! The stigma was removed from the name of him whom she had so long and so devotedly loved! She had been sustained by a wondrous courage throughout all the manifold proceedings which had been leading to this result: but now that it was accomplished a sudden reaction took place within her—the joy of success was almost more than she could endure—she staggered against the wall for support—she felt as if she were about to faint. Mr. Coleman hastened to procure a glass of water; and when the Queen had partaken of the refreshing beverage, she was revived.

She entered an adjacent apartment, attended by Mr. Coleman; and she said to him, "Is it, then, as we conjectured?—has the shock been too much——"

"It is so, your Majesty," answered the solicitor. "The physician declares that the unhappy man cannot survive many hours."

"And his wife—the unfortunate Lavinia—she

who can no longer be spoken of as the Duchess of Marchmont?"—and tears of compassion trickled down Indora's cheeks as she gave utterance to these words.

"The unfortunate lady of whom your Majesty speaks," rejoined Mr. Coleman, "is kneeling by the bed-side of her husband. The village clergyman has just arrived; and the perishing sinner is joining with him in prayer——"

"But Lavinia?" said the Queen, in accents of most mournful inquiry.

"That lady who is so deeply to be pitied," responded Coleman, "seems as if she likewise had received her death-blow. She is overwhelmed with grief and horror. She looks as if she were in a dream—in a kind of half-stupor which numbs the intensity of her affliction. She can scarcely believe that all she has heard is true. Was it not a distressing scene, madam, when your Majesty broke to the unhappy lady the terrific intelligence?"

"It was a scene," answered Indora, shuddering at the bare recollection, "which I never, never can forget,—a scene which will often hereafter haunt me; for the wild shriek which rang forth from Lavinia's lips is still sounding in my ears. Oh, yes—it was a frightful scene! And yet I was in a measure prepared for it: for I had previously granted the unhappy lady an interview, before the proceedings in the tribunal commenced. And in that interview I had endeavoured to prepare Lavinia's mind as much as possible for something dreadful. But, Oh! when I sought her a second time, and began breaking the frightful intelligence as delicately as I could——Oh! Mr. Coleman, the spectacle of anguish that I witnessed cannot possibly be described! Ah! it is terrible to reflect that in performing an act of justice—in proclaiming wrong and making right come uppermost—the consequences should redound with such appalling power upon the head of an innocent person!"

The Queen wiped away the tears from her eyes; and after a brief pause, Mr. Coleman inquired, "Where are that brother and sister?—where are those whom we must now call the Duke of Marchmont and Lady Christina Vivian?"

"I left them alone together after that dreadful scene when their wretched relative fell at their feet and confessed his stupendous guilt. He was removed to the chamber up-stairs; and then I said enough to my young friends to make them comprehend how it was that they belonged to the ducal house of Marchmont, and that Christian was now the bearer of the proud title. Yes—I left that young brother and sister alone together, that they might weep for joy and for grief in each other's arms,—for joy at this wondrous change in their circumstances, and for grief as they thought of their perished parents. I will now seek them; and before I retire to rest, I will likewise see that unhappy lady the idea of whose grief fills my own heart with woe."

"And I, with your Majesty's permission, will at once repair to London," said Mr. Coleman, "to communicate the results of this night's proceedings to him who is so deeply interested in them."

"But not until his unhappy brother shall have breathed his last," rejoined the Queen, "must you proclaim to the world how guilt has been made manifest and how innocence is vindicated."

Mr. Coleman bowed in acknowledgment of Indora's command; and he then took a respectful leave of the Queen, who forthwith proceeded to the apartment where she had left Christian and Christina nearly an hour back.

CHAPTER CXLVII.

DEATH.

It were scarcely possible to convey an idea of the feelings experienced by the twins on contemplating their suddenly altered position. That Christian should be the bearer of a ducal title—that Christina should now have a patrician prefix to her name—were facts which they could scarcely comprehend. They who had believed themselves to belong to a family in the middle-class of life, had now been told that they bore one of the loftiest names in the British Peerage. Moreover, they who not a very long while back had known the pinching need of penury, and had moistened poverty's crust with their tears, were to be now surrounded by almost boundless wealth and to be in the possession of immense means of doing good.

As yet they were unacquainted with all the minute details which so intimately concerned the mystery of their birth: but Queen Indora had told them sufficient to make them aware that they were the children of that Duke of Marchmont of whose murder they had read and heard, and at which they had shuddered,—the children of that Duchess Eliza for whose sorrows they had wept though at the same time believing her to have been the guilty paramour of Bertram Vivian. But now they knew that their mother was innocent—that neither previous to her departure from Oaklands, nor subsequent to it, had she deviated from the path of rectitude—and that though she and Bertram had loved fondly and devotedly, yet that this love of theirs had not betrayed them into error. Christian and Christina could therefore look without shame upon the memory of their unhappy mother: but not the less painful were the tears which they shed when reflecting how much that poor mother must have suffered ere she sank into her nameless grave in an obscure village churchyard in a distant county! And the twins wept painfully too as they thought of their unhappy sire, who when wandering forth in his despair, and in the silence of night, had met his death from the hand of an assassin. These were painful retrospections truly; and mingling with the consciousness of rank and wealth and brilliant position, they taught the twins the world's invariable lesson—that there is no perfect happiness upon earth, and that however high the chalice may be filled with honey, there is to be at least one drop of gall mingled with its contents.

And now too Christian and Christina were enabled to regard as a relation that noble-minded man whom, as Mr. Redcliffe, they had known as a friend and a benefactor: and Oh! how they rejoiced that his innocence had been made manifest. But here again was the gall mingling with the honey: for if on the one hand the startling revelations of this night had rendered them aware that they had a relative of whom they could be proud,

at the same time they learnt that they had another of whose crimes they could only think with blended distress and horror. Yes—bitterness was mingled with the sweetness of the twins' reflections: but still there was happiness for them,—happiness for that beautifully handsome young man who now bore a ducal title—happiness for that maiden of transcending loveliness whose name a patrician dignity graced! And at one time this young man had served in a humble capacity the very kinsman who bore that usurped title,—the very kinsman who enjoyed the wealth that was now to be all Christian's own! But, Ah! if there were one reason more than another for which our young hero rejoiced in the wondrous change that had taken place in his circumstances, it was that he could place the coronet of a Duchess upon the brow of that charming Isabella who had loved so faithfully, so devotedly, so unselfishly.

The twins embraced each other over and over again when they were left alone together by Queen Indora: they mingled their tears as they spoke of their perished parents—and they smiled upon each other in mutual congratulations for the bounties which all in a moment seemed to be showering upon their heads. Then they exchanged solemn looks; and they shuddered simultaneously, and Christian drew his sister closer to him, as they spoke in half-hushed and awe-inspired whispers of the wretched man whom they had ere now seen kneeling, crushed and overwhelmed, at their feet: but again they smiled as they exultingly exclaimed, "Thank heaven, *his* innocence is made manifest!"

And though neither at the moment mentioned the name, yet in the sympathy and unison of their hearts did they mutually comprehend to whom the allusion pointed—that benefactor whom they had known as Mr. Redcliffe, and whom they had subsequently learnt to be Lord Clandon or Bertram Vivian, and who was now the inmate of a felon's gaol—but a gaol from which he would shortly be released! And Oh! what a deep debt of gratitude did the twins feel that they owed to that high-minded, noble-hearted Queen who had toiled on so laboriously, so perseveringly, and so arduously, to bring all matters to that crisis which should at the same instant afford the opportunity for proving Bertram Vivian's innocence, and for proclaiming that they themselves were scions of the ducal house of Marchmont. But on the other hand how immense was the compassion which Christian and Christina experienced for the unfortunate Lavinia!—that lady whom they knew to be so innocent and so amiable, and who had proved a ministering angel to the husband at whose hands she had sustained so much wrong in so many different ways!

The twins had been left alone together for nearly an hour ere Queen Indora returned to them as morning was advancing. But during that hour how much had they to think of—how much to talk of—what subjects of wonder and horror to contemplate—what contrasts to draw between the past and the present—what tears of sweetness and sadness to shed in alternate showers!

And now the Queen came back to them; and Christina threw herself into the arms of that Sovereign lady who had never treated her as an inferior, but always as a friend: and Christian, taking her Majesty's hand, pressed it to his lips. They sat down to converse together; and the Queen communicated to them the happy intelligence that Mr. Coleman had set off to London to report the issue of all these proceedings at Oaklands to him whom they so nearly concerned; so that our hero and heroine knew that not many hours would elapse ere Bertram Vivian would be relieved from all suspense, and would have the joyous consciousness that his innocence would be triumphantly made apparent to the whole world.

The discourse of Queen Indora and the twins was interrupted by the entrance of Purvis, the faithful old steward, who came as the bearer of a special request to him whom he now for the first time saluted as Duke of Marchmont.

"My lord," he said, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "permit an old man who liked and loved you when little dreaming who you really were, to offer his felicitations on your attainment of your just rights. And in you, lady," continued Purvis, turning towards Christina, "I recognise a resemblance to your poor mother."

The steward, the Queen, and the twins were all much affected; and the two latter grasped the old man by the hand.

"I come," said Purvis, after a pause, during which he to a certain extent regained his self-possession, "with a message from that dying man——"

"If he wish to see me," said Christian, "I will go to him! If he be penitent—truly and sincerely penitent—I will not refuse him my forgiveness, although he took my father's life!"

"And your ladyship," said the old steward, again addressing himself to Christina—"will you accompany my lord your brother?—for the dying man implores the pardon of you both!"

"Yes—I will go," replied our generous-hearted heroine.

Queen Indora glanced approvingly on the twins; and they issued from the room, followed by Purvis. They ascended the staircase: they paused for a moment at the door of the chamber in which lay the dying nobleman; and in the sympathetic unison of their hearts they exchanged looks which were as much as to imply that they both felt the necessity of conquering all repugnances as much as possible, in order that they might smooth the pillow of the dying penitent.

Purvis gently opened the door; and the twins entered. By the couch knelt Lavinia, her face resting upon her hands; and by her side knelt the village clergyman. The physician was standing close by the head of the bed, with a solemn expression of countenance: for though accustomed to look upon death-scenes, yet this one was attended with circumstances extraordinarily calculated to strike the heart with awe. But the dying nobleman himself——Oh! what pen can describe the ghastliness of his countenance—the utter misery of his looks? His hair which had only recently begun to turn grey, had actually grown many shades whiter during the last few hours. Instead of having the appearance of a man in the prime of life, he looked as if at least sixty winters had passed over his head.

Lavinia and the clergyman, upon hearing the door gently close, quitted their kneeling postures; and tears gushed forth from the eyes of both Christian and Christina on catching the first glimpse of the countenance of her who had so

long borne the title of Duchess of Marchmont. All vital tint seemed to have fled from that countenance: even the very lips were of marble paleness. Its expression was so haggard, so care-worn, so woe-begone, that even if she herself had been criminal it would have excited pity: but innocent in every respect as they knew her to be, it filled their hearts with anguish to look upon the face of that afflicted lady. The clergyman—a venerable man—bowed to the twins with the profoundest respect, and contemplated them with a mournful interest: for he had known their parents—and he was indebted to their father for the incumbency which he held. The physician likewise saluted the young Duke of Marchmont and Lady Christina Vivian: but the dying nobleman covered his face with his thin wan hands, and groaned audibly.

Lavinia tried to speak—but she could not: her voice was choked with the intensity of her feelings: yet her eyes eloquently proclaimed the gratitude she experienced for this visit of pardon which they paid to her perishing husband. As for that man himself—he also tried to give utterance to some words; and he essayed likewise to raise himself up in the couch: but the power of speech seemed to have gone from his palsied throat, and that of motion from his tranced limbs. Another attempt on Lavinia's part to say something to the young pair, proved ineffectual: for the first sounds of the syllables that wavered on her lips, died away in a spasm of intensest agony which excruciated her whole frame. She burst into tears: and seizing the hand of each of the twins, she pressed them by turns to her lips. Christina threw her arms round Lavinia's neck and wept passionately upon her bosom: while Christian tremulously murmured, "We are here to assure your husband of forgiveness!"

"Oh, this is more than I could have expected!" moaned the dying nobleman, now finding utterance for a few broken sentences. "I who have been so wicked—so deeply stained with guilt—I who deprived your father of his life—Oh, Christian!—Christina!—it is more than I ought to have hoped!—But, my God! even now that you are here, I cannot look you in the face!"

And again did the wretched man cover his countenance with his hands.

"If your penitence be sincere—as I trust and hope and believe it is," said Christian, in a soft voice, "receive the assurance of my pardon—and that of my sister!"

"*Can* you forgive me? is it possible that you can forgive me?" asked the dying man. "Oh, what hearts do you both possess! It must be a paradise to have such hearts as yours: but mine cannot understand them! Yes, Christian—my penitence is sincere. O God! with such remorse as this, how can there be otherwise than contrition? My confession is made: you are Duke of Marchmont. I need not ask that you and your amiable sister will be kind to my poor wife——"

"Think not of me, Hugh!" gasped forth the afflicted Lavinia. "I shall not long survive you. I feel it *here!*"—and with an expression of ineffable anguish on her countenance, she pressed her hand upon her heart.

"Christian, you have forgiven me," continued the dying nobleman, in a hollow voice; and at the same time his equally hollow eyes were turned towards our hero; "and such generosity on your part will experience its reward. The same with Christina. Oh, if I dared bless you——But no, no! blessings from my lips——"

"Remember," said Christian, "that a Redeemer died to save us from the consequences of our sins; and for our blessed Saviour's sake the mercy of God is illimitable!"

"Oh, these are words of solace, coming from *your* lips!" murmured the dying man: and he made a movement as if he would take the hand of our young hero.

"It is a sign of forgiveness which from my heart I afford you!" said Christian: and he at once gave his hand to the perishing penitent.

At the same moment a change came suddenly and visibly over the countenance of the latter: its paleness grew corpse-like—the eyes appeared to sink deeper into their sockets—some words to which he could not give audible utterance, wavered upon his lips: then came a low moan, followed by a gasp—and next by a strong spasm, which seemed to thrill painfully through the penitent's form—and then all was over!

There was a profound and solemn silence for the space of several moments; but Lavinia appeared uncertain relative to the supreme fact. She gazed with a dismay—half wild, half awe-felt—upon the countenance of her husband: then she swept her looks around upon those who stood with her by the side of the couch; and she read in their faces the truth to which she had striven to close her convictions. A piercing cry burst from her lips; and whether she fell forward or threw herself upon the corpse, was not apparent: but there she lay, motionless as he upon whose form her head rested. For several instants those who beheld the unfortunate Lavinia, fancied that she was abandoning herself to a profound and absorbing woe which had supervened on that sudden access of wild despair: but as she moved not, and as not so much as even a sob or a sigh was wafted to their ears, they grew alarmed. They raised her: there was a small pool of blood on the counterpane at the spot where her mouth had rested; and the physician pronounced her to be a corpse.

Deeply, deeply affected were the twins, as they suffered themselves to be led forth from that chamber of death. They rejoined the Queen, to whom they communicated the details of the sad scene they had witnessed; and Indora mournfully remarked that it were better for Lavinia to have died thus, than to have lived to deplore a husband who was unworthy of her lamentation. Her Majesty and the twins retired to their respective chambers to rest for a few hours: but sleep closed not the eyes of either of them.

The man who had so long borne the title of the Duke of Marchmont, was now no more: he had passed beyond that sphere in which his crimes would have rendered him amenable to human laws—he had gone to that other world; in which he was to appear in the presence of a more dread tribunal. But his wife, who had been an angel on earth, had gone at the same time to be an angel in heaven; and it was a touching reflection, made by the twins to each other, that the hapless Lavinia had taken that eternal flight at such a moment to intercede at the footstool of eternal grace for the

man to whom, notwithstanding all his crimes, her heart was devoted. It was now communicated to all the domestics and to the surrounding tenantry that our young hero was Duke of Marchmont. He received their respectful homage with a becoming modesty; and he gave orders that the funeral of the deceased husband and wife should be conducted with all possible privacy. They were interred in the family vault of the village church; and thus terminated the career of a man whose life was full of misdeeds, and of a lady whose soul was spotless.

Wilson Stanhope, Mrs. Oxenden, and Armytage were released from their captivity, according to the Queen's promise; and they all three had their own good reasons for maintaining a profound silence in respect to the transactions in which they had played a part at Oaklands. Madame Angelique executed a deed, which Mr. Coleman drew up, transferring the bulk of her property to certain charitable institutions in the metropolis; and she was then suffered to take her departure from Oaklands, bitterly repenting that she had ever mixed herself up in the affairs of the late owner of that mansion. The Burker was conveyed away secretly, and under circumstances of all possible precaution, by the two Hindoos; and in a deep disguise, as well as under a feigned name, he was placed on board a ship bound for the East Indies. The embalmed corpse of Sagoonah was interred in the churchyard of the village of Oaklands.

We have purposely avoided entering as yet into any details calculated to clear up the mysteries attending the fate of the Duchess Eliza after her flight from Oaklands, as well as the birth of her twin children; because we shall presently have to describe the whole of the evidence which was given before a Committee of Privileges appointed by the House of Lords to investigate the claim of Christian to the Marchmont Peerage. But before commencing those important explanations, we will lay before the reader the substance of the confession made by the deceased nobleman, in the presence of Mr. Coleman, Purvis, and the physician, and which the solicitor duly committed to paper. In doing this, we shall have to make repeated references to the opening chapters of our narrative; and it would therefore be as well if the reader would here cast a glance over those earliest portions of the story which related the loves of Bertram and Eliza.

Soon after the marriage of the Duke of Marchmont and Miss Lacey, they went abroad on a continental tour, which lasted for several months; and they then returned to Oaklands, in the autumn of the year 1829. There they were joined by Lord Clandon and Bertram Vivian. The singular behaviour of Eliza and Bertram to each other, mystified Lord Clandon, who was perfectly ignorant of the loves of his brother and Eliza when they were at Oxford—as indeed the Duke himself likewise was. Lord Clandon fancied that Mrs. Bailey, as a relation of the youthful Duchess, might possibly be in her Grace's confidence, and therefore be enabled to throw some light on the matter which thus bewildered him. He succeeded, as the reader will recollect, in worming out of Mrs. Bailey the entire narrative of the past. Devilish ideas were thereby engendered in Lord Clandon's brain. He was steeped to the very lips in debt; and he knew perfectly well that generous though his uncle the Duke was, he would not disburse the large sum that was required to clear him of his liabilities. Besides, he constantly trembled lest his creditors should expose the state of his affairs to the Duke,—who, being a man imbued with the highest sense of honour in pecuniary matters, was quite capable of discarding him altogether and withdrawing his countenance from him. The Duke's marriage had been deeply galling to Lord Clandon; and the youth of the Duchess seemed to promise that it might not be unproductive of issue. Thus if an heir were born to the title and estates of Marchmont, farewell to the last hope of Lord Clandon, who would be doomed to remain a poor Peer, with an income of scarcely a couple of thousand a-year, and with debts to ten times that amount.

His lordship was therefore inspired with evil thoughts by the narrative he had received from Mrs. Bailey's lips. At that time, however, he entertained not the slightest idea of assassinating his uncle: all he aimed at was so to direct his machinations that the Duke should at once divorce himself from the Duchess and thereby deprive himself of the hope of having legitimate progeny from his marriage. It was of the highest importance for Clandon to achieve this object: for the success of the measure would leave him still heir-presumptive to the title and estates of Marchmont; and so long as he had these prospects before him, he could raise money and satisfy his creditors.

He therefore lost no time in putting his evil projects in a train of operation. He threw himself in the way of the Duke, and insinuated himself into his Grace's confidence. Thoroughly versed in all the arts of hypocrisy, he affected a mild, submissive, and deferential manner while proffering his insidious advice; and at the same time he played his part so well that he seemed to be as much swayed by affection towards his brother as by a respectful esteem for the Duchess, and by love, gratitude, and veneration for his uncle. The Duke listened to him with a thankful confidence; while Clandon affected to believe that the conduct of Eliza and Bertram towards each other arose from an excess of prudence on the part of the former, and an extreme sensitiveness on that of the latter. He proceeded to recommend that the Duke should throw Bertram and Eliza more together—and that he should afford them opportunities of cultivating a friendly intimacy. The bait took: the Duke followed his villanous nephew's insidious advice; and the results were as Clandon had foreseen.

He continuously watched the proceedings of Bertram and Eliza: he saw how their manner changed towards each other, and that all their love was reviving in their hearts. Then it was that he penned an anonymous letter, in a feigned haud, addressed to the Duke, and the contents of which were to the effect that Bertram was dishonouring him. The Duke watched the movements of his young wife and Bertram; and he beheld that embrace in which the latter passionately and impetuously folded the Duchess. The reader will recollect the scene which ensued. Bertram fled to the village inn, having previously encountered his brother Lord Clandon, to whom he imparted what had occurred; and the inani-

JANE BARCLAY.
(When in the service of the Duchess Eliza.)

mate form of the Duchess was borne into the mansion. The Duke ordered Mrs. Bailey's carriage to be immediately got in readiness to take the Duchess away. Lord Clandon inwardly chuckled at the success which was thus attending his schemes: but he affected the utmost sympathy with his uncle, and even spoke as if he were inclined to plead for his brother. The Duchess sent a letter by one of her maids to Mrs. Bailey, with a request that she would present it to the Duke, for whom it was intended. Lord Clandon volunteered to perform this office; and he entered the apartment in which the Duke had shut himself. He dared not conceal the fact that he had been entrusted with a letter, for fear it should subsequently transpire by some other means: but while appearing to study the language of conciliation, he in reality so framed his speech that it tended to aggravate and embitter his uncle more than ever, if possible, against the Duchess. He thus accomplished the result at which he aimed: for the Duke positively refused to open his wife's letter. However, on issuing forth from the Duke's presence, Clandon assured the maid that the Duke *had* read the letter, but that his resolve was not to be shaken. The Duchess seeing that her last hope was gone, then left the house.

In the meanwhile Bertram from the village inn had despatched a letter to the Duke; and when Lord Clandon joined him at that tavern, Bertram informed him of the circumstance. The Duke received the letter, the contents of which filled him with a bewildering uncertainty. After all, Eliza might be innocent! He sent for Jane, her Grace's principal lady's-maid; and from her lips he heard that the Duchess had called God to witness her innocence, previous to her departure. Jane moreover informed the Duke that her Grace's writing-desk contained certain documents to which she had made allusion in the letter sent by the hand of Lord Clandon. The Duke flew to his wife's boudoir—opened the writing-desk—and read all the letters which gave him a complete insight into the loves of Bertram and Eliza at Oxford. Then a veil fell from his eyes; and he believed that his wife was innocent. He rushed forth from the boudoir, and encountered Lord Clandon, who had just come back from the village after his interview with his brother. There was then a horrible clearness in the mind of the Duke; and the conviction smote him that Lord Clandon had been playing a most perfidious game. He bade Clandon follow him into the drawing-room; and there he at once accused him in a manner which made Hugh imagine that his uncle had by some means acquired a positive knowledge of his treachery. He was filled with confusion: the Duke beheld his guilt depicted upon his countenance; and he abruptly quitted his nephew in a way which testified all his displeasure.

Lord Clandon was horrified on thus beholding a gulf suddenly opening at his own feet and threatening to swallow him up. All his schemes appeared to be redounding with overwhelming violence against himself. The Duke would take back his wife, and would restore his confidence to Bertram! Ruin and disgrace would remain as the portion for the guilty Clandon! Then it was that in the utter desperation of his soul the horrible thought of assassinating his uncle flashed into his brain. It speedily settled and acquired consistency there: his purpose was fixed. But in order to play a part which should eventually avert or disarm suspicion, he affected to be deeply anxious that the Duchess should be found; and he offered a reward to any individual who should discover her retreat. He went out as if to search for the Duchess—but it was in reality to look for his uncle. He however failed in falling in with the Duke; and he returned to Oaklands. Shortly afterwards his Grace reappeared: but Lord Clandon took good care not to throw himself in his uncle's way. From his valet Travers he learnt that the Duke had gone out again. This was past one in the morning; and Lord Clandon pretended that he should retire to rest,—bidding Travers call him early that he might get on horseback and renew the search after the Duchess. When Travers had retired, Lord Clandon stole down from his chamber; and provided with a pistol, and with a dagger which he had taken from Bertram's room, he sallied forth from the mansion. His search on this occasion was not a long one: for he met his uncle close by the pond in the bye-lane. The Duke was indignant on recognising Clandon; and he turned away from him. The next moment the fatal blow was dealt: the murderer's hand plunged the dagger deep down between his uncle's shoulders. With a savage howl the Duke's dog Pluto sprang at the assassin; and Clandon instantaneously discharged his pistol. The faithful animal had caught the murderer by the skirt of his coat, and Clandon did not perceive that a piece had been torn off. The dog fell wounded; and the murderer rushed away. Regaining the mansion, he stole up to his own chamber—and tossed off his clothes, still unsuspecting, in the horrible confusion of his mind, that a fragment of his coat had remained in the dog's mouth. Soon after six o'clock the servants of the household were again up; and on the portals being opened, the wounded Pluto dragged himself in. Lord Clandon, hearing the sounds of many voices down-stairs, hastily rose from his bed, and dressed himself in a different suit from that which he had worn at the time of the murder; for he naturally studied every circumstance to prove that he had actually been in bed for the last few hours. On descending to the hall, he found the servants surrounding the dog, from whose mouth the piece of cloth had dropped. Travers was there at the time: but on observing that fragment of cloth, he was smitten with a suspicion—and he rushed up to his master's room. There he found the coat which Lord Clandon had thrown off; and while he was yet examining it, that nobleman himself entered the chamber. He saw that it would be impossible to conceal his guilt from his valet; and with a haggard, ghastly look, he said, "Travers, be silent—be secret—and your fortune is made!"

Travers bowed in silence: but by his own looks he showed that he understood his master's meaning, and that he might be fully relied upon. The corpse of the Duke was found; and by the devilish ingenuity of Lord Clandon, all circumstances were so well combined as to throw the whole weight of suspicion upon his brother Bertram.

From these explanations the reader can be at no loss to comprehend the details of the confession made by the murderer on his death-bed; and which were duly taken down by Mr. Coleman in the presence of Purvis and the physician.

CHAPTER CXLVIII.

LORD CLANDON.

We need hardly inform the reader that immense was the public excitement when it became reported abroad that Lord Clandon was innocent of the murder of his uncle many years back—that he who had so long borne the ducal title since that tragic event, was the veritable assassin — that having in a last illness made a full confession, he had prematurely paid the debt of nature—that his unhappy wife, as innocent as *he* was guilty, had perished through affliction at the same time—and that a youthful heir had been found for the title of Marchmont. But it did not transpire by what means these revelations and these circumstances had been brought about: the secret of Queen Indora's arrangements in respect to the tribunal, was faithfully kept by the old steward Purvis and the other domestics at Oaklands who had been necessarily privy to those measures.

The Queen and the twins returned to London: Christina remained with her Majesty—but Christian, by the advice of Mr. Coleman, and likewise at the earnest recommendation of his cousin Lord Clandon, proceeded to take up his abode at Marchmont House in Belgrave Square. There, at a mansion in which he had formerly filled a comparatively humble position, he was now received as a lord and a master; and the carriages of the highest aristocracy were continuously driving up to the door that cards might be left for the young Duke of Marchmont.

The day for Lord Clandon's trial was now at hand: the law required that this ceremony should take place, though every one knew that it must prove a mere matter of form, and that the innocence of his lordship would be fully made manifest. Indeed, immediately after the events at Oaklands Lord Clandon ceased to occupy a cell in the prison of Newgate—but was lodged in the best apartments of the Governor's house, where he was treated with all possible distinction. He did not however avail himself of the altered circumstances of his case to demand permission to issue from the prison-walls: but he was daily visited by Queen Indora, the young Duke of Marchmont, and Lady Christina Vivian.

The day of the trial arrived; and the court was crowded to excess. Indora and Christina were not there: they considered that it would not be seemly for them to make their appearance thus in public. But Christian was present; and as he sat upon the bench near the judge, he was an object of the utmost interest on the part of all the spectators. Clad in mourning—which he however wore rather for the sake of the hapless Laviuia than for that of the assassin of his own father—looking pale and slightly careworn with the effects of much excitement,—the young Duke maintained a demeanour in which dignity and modesty were blended; and he longed for the termination of these proceedings that he might accompany his loved relative Lord Clandon to the home prepared for his reception in Belgrave Square.

A profound silence for a few minutes reigned in the Court when Lord Clandon was ushered into the dock; and a feeling of deep sympathy prevailed on behalf of that nobleman. He, as well as Christian, was clad in mourning: for inasmuch as his brother had died penitent, Bertram did not conceive that he ought to refuse that tribute to the memory of the deceased.

The jury having been sworn and the indictment read, there was a pause to afford an opportunity for the prosecuting counsel, if any, to rise and open the case. But there was none; and the judge observed—glancing with much kindness and sympathy towards the prisoner,—"It is notorious that in this case the nobleman who stands in the dock will in a few minutes make his innocence completely manifest; and it is therefore a most unnecessary humiliation to keep him in a place which criminals only should occupy."

This hint was immediately welcomed by murmurs of approbation; and the turnkey at once requested Lord Clandon to issue from the dock and take a seat at the barristers' table. Then several noblemen and gentlemen, who had known him in his younger days, crowded round to shake him by the hand: and several friends of a more recent date likewise pressed forward for the same purpose. Amongst these latter were Sir William Stanley, his son Captain Stanley, and Sir Frederick Latham. Mr. Coleman was likewise there,—having in his possession the important document which had recently been drawn up at Oaklands, and which was now to be produced. This was the confession.

In the first place Purvis the steward, and the physician who had attended at the murderer's death-bed, were placed in the witness-box and sworn; and they declared that they had attested the document which was now exhibited to them. Mr. Coleman went through the same ceremony, and the clerk of the Court then read the confession. It was listened to with the attention and interest which such a narrative was so well calculated to excite; and when the reading was terminated, the foreman of the jury at once rose, saying, "It is with unfeigned pleasure that we formally proclaim that with which the court was already acquainted; namely, the innocence of Lord Clandon."

"Before your lordship pronounces my discharge," said Bertram, rising from the seat which he had taken at the barristers' table, "I would crave your indulgence and that of the jury while I speak a few words on my own behalf. I admit my object to be that they should go forth to the public through the ordinary channels of intelligence. I have two distinct purposes in view: in the first place, to rescue the memory of a deceased lady from even the slightest remnant of suspicion which may rest against it — and in the second place to prove how for several long years I was in utter ignorance of my uncle's tragic end, and how for even some time after that intelligence reached me, I was unable to take any steps towards the demonstration of my innocence."

Lord Clandon paused for a few moments: he was deeply affected at that allusion which he had made to the deceased Duchess Eliza. Having regained his self-possession, and amidst the breathless silence which prevailed in the court, he proceeded as follows: —

"Not for an instant do I attempt to deny that I fondly and devotedly loved Eliza Lacey, with

whom I first became acquainted at Oxford. We plighted our faith to each other: we were separated—and I went abroad. During my absence it was reported that I had perished; and she was prevailed upon to accompany my uncle the Duke of Marchmont to the altar. Subsequently she learnt that I was alive: but into all these details of a sad, sad history it is not my purpose to enter. Suffice it to say that I deemed her faithless; and on arriving in England, I repaired to Oaklands that I might have an opportunity of upbraiding her for the supposed perfidy. That opportunity presented itself: but, alas! I found that she was to be pitied and not blamed. Our mental agony was immense—excruciating—ineffable. But she was a wife! Had she been the wife of a stranger, her position would have rendered her not the less sacred in my eyes: but as the wife of my own uncle——Oh! I was incapable of a deed of infamy! It was arranged that I was to depart speedily from Oaklands and set out for the Court of Florence, to which I had been appointed Envoy Plenipotentiary. The moment for bidding farewell drew nigh: my adieux were said to the Duchess Eliza; and yielding to the anguish of my feelings, I clasped her in my arms. The Duke beheld the scene—as you have already been informed by the confession ere now read,—that confession of my guilty brother! I fled to the village tavern; and some while afterwards my brother joined me, with the intelligence that the Duchess Eliza had disappeared from Oaklands. She had gone forth as a wanderer on the face of the earth,—she who was innocent! Maddened by the tidings, I sped in search of the unhappy lady. For hours I wandered; and at length I overtook her. It was then midnight;—and in a lonely spot by the side of a stream was she seated, weeping bitterly. This spot was miles away from Oaklands. She reproached me not as the author of the frightful calamities which had fallen upon her head; and though she gave way to the most passionate lamentations, she mentioned not my name with upbraiding. She vowed that she would retire into some complete seclusion where she would linger out the rest of her unhappy days; and this seclusion she was determined should be far remote from the scenes where she had suffered so much misery. My conduct was full of respect and sympathy and grief; and I did not even so much as take her hand: I felt that any demonstration of tenderness on my part would be an insult in such circumstances. I persuaded her to proceed to an adjacent village where she might repose herself for a few hours. She accompanied me: we walked side by side—she did not even take my arm, though she was sinking with fatigue—and I dared not offer it. As we entered the village, in the middle of that momentous night, a return post-chaise was passing through. The unhappy Duchess abruptly proclaimed her intention of taking it. She entered the vehicle: I sat upon the box;—I was resolved that whatsoever might subsequently transpire, there should be nothing in my conduct to justify or to enhance the suspicions already pressing so fatally against her. On reaching the town to which the chaise belonged, the Duchess bade me ensure her the means of rapid conveyance to one of the remotest counties of England, it mattered not which. An equipage with four horses was accordingly obtained; and I resolved to see the unfortunate lady to some place of safety before I bade her farewell for ever: for I was afraid lest in her despair she should commit suicide! Indeed," added Lord Clandon, with a voice full of emotion, "I believe she meditated self-destruction at the moment when I found her weeping so bitterly by the side of that stream."

He again paused for a few minutes; and then continued his narrative in the ensuing manner:—

"The Duchess travelled inside the chaise: I continued to ride outside, acting as her guardian and her friend. We travelled on and on for many long, long hours without ceasing; and frequently did I ask the Duchess whether she would now stop and find a home in some neighbouring seclusion? But when she asked where we were, and the answer was first 'In Warwickshire'—then 'In Derbyshire'—then 'In Yorkshire'—she still replied with passionate vehemence that she would go further still. And thus, without stopping except for a few minutes at a time, we reached Cumberland. Then the Duchess said that she would halt there; and indeed, thoroughly exhausted mentally and physically as she was, it would have been impossible for her to proceed farther. At a village near the Scottish Border did we thus stop at last; and the Duchess besought that I would continue to conceal her name and rank, as both had been concealed throughout that long, long journey. With the least possible delay the unhappy Duchess procured for herself a lodging in a cottage situated about a mile from the village, and the mistress of which was a widow between thirty and forty years of age. I then bade adieu to the Duchess. There was one clasp of the hand—there was one kiss imprinted upon her brow—and I rushed away, not daring to remain another minute!"

Again did Lord Clandon pause; and so full of pathos had been his voice as he told this affecting tale, that there was scarcely an unmoistened eye in the Court.

"Yes, I fled precipitately," he at length resumed, "anguish and remorse in my heart—for I felt that I had been the cause of this wrecked happiness and ruined reputation which had overtaken one so innocent, so young, so beautiful! I sped to the nearest seaport on the eastern coast: I embarked on board the first ship which I found ready to bear me away from a country that I resolved never to revisit. I pictured to myself a terrific exposure at Oaklands—the direst accusations fulminating against my character—my reputation gone—my prospects blighted—and the name of Bertram Vivian handed over to universal execration as that of the seducer of his own uncle's wife! It was a Dutch ship in which I embarked; and I arrived at Rotterdam. At the very moment of entering the port, a large ship was clearing out for the Indian Seas. Unhesitatingly I took my passage on board of her; and favoured by prosperous winds, the voyage was made in an exceedingly short space of time to Java. Thence I repaired to Calcutta, with the determination of offering my services to the Anglo-Indian Government; for the funds which I had in my possession when leaving England, were now nearly exhausted. I had assumed the name of Clement Redcliffe; and I should add that my arrival at Calcutta had out-

stripped all British intelligence of events passing at the time I left my own native country: so that I still continued in the completest ignorance of the horrible tragedy which had occurred at Oaklands. I must here observe that it happened, when I was engaged in a diplomatic capacity at Washington—prior to that fatal visit of mine to England which had led me to Oaklands—I had obtained certain intelligence in respect to the policy of the United States' Government towards Japan and China. I learnt on my arrival at Calcutta that there were flying rumours of this contemplated policy: but no one seemed to understand the precise bearings thereof. I waited upon the Governor-General, and gave him such explanations that not only astonished him, but likewise proved to be of the highest importance; so that he was enabled to send off efficient instructions to the naval commanders in the Chinese seas, as well as to the British political agents in various quarters. My introduction to the Governor-General was thus most favourable to my views; and when I informed him that I had been attached to the British Embassy at Washington he asked me no more questions: it never struck him that I might have borne another name; and he at once offered me employment in the civil service of India. This I accepted; and in a very few days set off on a special mission to the Nizam. At that Sovereign's Court I remained for upwards of a year, deeply engaged in diplomatic negotiations. No English newspaper ever reached me; and I thus continued in total ignorance of the events which so intimately regarded my character and good name in my native land. Having succeeded in all the objects for which I had been accredited to the Nizam's Court, I was directed by a special courier bearing despatches from the Governor-General to repair on a similar mission to the King of Inderabad. From various causes the small retinue with which I travelled, dwindled away; and I arrived alone at the chief city of Inderabad. There I found myself a prisoner. Years elapsed; no inquiry was made after me—for the King of Inderabad, in order to accomplish his own aims, caused the rumour to be spread that I was no more. At length, in the year 1845, an English traveller was assassinated, by miscreants of the Thuggee caste, in a forest at no great distance from the city of Inderabad. Amongst his effects an English newspaper was discovered. Though sixteen years had then elapsed since the events at Oaklands, there was nevertheless a paragraph in that journal which alluded thereto. It was one of those paragraphs which frequently refer to any memorable occurrences connected with eminent families: and *then*, for the first time, I learnt that my uncle had been murdered—that I was branded as his assassin—that neither myself nor the Duchess Eliza had ever since been heard of—and it was supposed that we as a guilty pair had fled together to some remote part of the world, to elude the consequences of our crimes. I will not pause to depict the feelings with which I perused this statement: but I implored my freedom—and it was still refused. A short while afterwards I succeeded in effecting my escape,—bringing with me the immense wealth which the King of Inderabad had lavished in acknowledgment of various important services that I had rendered him. I returned to England; and my first care was to search the files of newspapers to gather a complete knowledge of all that had taken place after my precipitate flight from Oaklands. My hideous suspicions were confirmed: I comprehended but too well that my wretched brother must have been the murderer of his uncle, and that to save himself he had so combined all circumstances as to fix the guilt upon me. I need now say no more. In a short time, and in another place, I shall be called upon to continue a narrative which is so replete with sad and memorable details. But I have said sufficient to prove the complete innocence of the Duchess Eliza, and to show likewise how it was that so many long, long years elapsed ere I returned to this country to make inquiries into the past and to adopt the requisite measures for vindicating my own maligned reputation."

Lord Clandon ceased; and there were strong demonstrations of interest and sympathy through the court. The Judge addressed him in a complimentary manner—winding up a most appropriate speech with the intimation that he was now at freedom. Lord Clandon bowed, and left the court in company with his friends.

CHAPTER CXLIX.

THE COMMITTEE OF PRIVILEGES.

ALTHOUGH the right and title of the young Duke of Marchmont appeared to have been universally admitted—although he entered at once upon possession of the mansions, revenues, and vast domains—and although not the slightest opposition was from any quarter displayed, and no pettifogging attorney endeavoured to rake up a case with the view of being bought off so as not to throw trouble in the way—yet was it absolutely necessary, for the sake alike of form and law, that our young hero should prove his claims before a Committee of Privileges of the House of Lords. For this purpose the expiration of two or three months had to be awaited for the assembling of Parliament. Queen Indora therefore remained in England—because Lord Clandon was himself forced to tarry for that committee, and it was arranged that her Majesty and his lordship were to return to India together.

We will not now pause to describe how passed the time during this interval: but we will at once proceed to state that on the assembling of Parliament the Lords appointed a committee to conduct the investigation. Mr. Coleman, assisted by able Doctors of Civil Law, managed the entire case; and it was naturally his study to present the evidence in its most consecutive form to the noble committee.

The young Duke of Marchmont himself was the first witness in his own case. He stated that himself and his sister Christina had been brought up from their earliest infancy by a gentleman of the name of Ashton, who resided at a village in Westmoreland, at a distance of about twenty-five miles from Woodbridge. Christian and Christina had always been led to suppose that Mr. Ashton was their uncle, and that their own parents had died when they were babes. Nothing had ever oc-

curred until the grand disclosure at Oaklands, to excite in their minds a suspicion that this story of their birth was otherwise than completely true. They were born at the end of May, 1830; and their birthday had always been regularly kept by Mr. Ashton. Some time before he died, he had given them certain relics which he represented as having belonged to their deceased mother; and these Christian produced. There was a long tress of raven hair: next there was a beautiful gold watch of delicate fashion and exquisite workmanship, with the cipher E graven upon the case: then there were two rings, one of which was a wedding-ring—the other of peculiar workmanship, with the cipher B graven upon a stone. Christian proceeded to relate that about three years previously Mr. Ashton had died suddenly, being stricken with an apoplectic fit; and for some little while after his death the twins continued to reside at the same house in the village. Then a certain Mr. Joseph Preston—of whom they had some little previous acquaintance, as he was a friend of Mr. Ashton's—signified to them that they must repair to London, so that they might be in the same city where he dwelt and that he might be enabled to attend to their welfare. He made them a liberal allowance, considering that their wants were small and that their habits were the very reverse of being extravagant: but he never gave them any information relative to their private affairs nor the pecuniary circumstances in which they had been left; nor did he explain the views which, if any, he entertained with regard to their future position. At the expiration of a few months Mr. Preston suddenly disappeared; and the twins were reduced to considerable temporary difficulties.

In answer to certain leading questions which were purposely put in order to elicit all the particulars that might bear upon his case,—Christian stated that he had recently been shown some papers represented to be in the handwriting of the late Mr. Ashton, and which regarded the circumstances of the birth of himself and sister; and he could vouch that these papers were positively in the handwriting of the said deceased Mr. Ashton.

Depositions of all that had occurred at Oaklands in the month of September and beginning of October 1829, were now put in and read before the Lords forming the Committee of Privileges.

The next witness who was called, was a female answering to the name of Jane Barclay. This was none other than she whom the reader has previously known as Crazy Jane: but she deserved the epithet no longer. Under a judicious system of treatment in the house of an eminent psychological physician, she had completely regained her intellect; and the poor mad wanderer of many years had, through the liberality and kindness of Lord Clandon, become restored to the possession of all her reasoning faculties. She was now decently, indeed handsomely apparelled; and though care, and suffering, and fatigues during that errant life which she had led, had destroyed the beauty with which in her youth she was endowed,—yet was her aspect marvellously improved, and no one who had known her as Crazy Jane would have recognised her now as Miss Barclay. She deposed to the fact that only a few days before the terrible scenes took place at Oaklands, in the year 1829, the Duchess Eliza had intimated to her that she fancied she was in a way to become a mother—but that she should not immediately inform the Duke thereof, as she could not be altogether certain in so early a stage of pregnancy. In answer to questions that were put to her, Jane Barclay was positively enabled to state that if the Duchess were correct in her idea, and if she had really lived to become a mother, the time of her confinement must have been about the very date mentioned by our young hero as that of the birthday of himself and his twin sister. Jane Barclay was enabled to swear that the watch marked with the letter E had belonged to the Duchess Eliza: but she did not remember ever to have seen the ring graven with the letter B in the possession of her Grace. As for the wedding-ring, she could not of course pretend to assert that it was her ladyship's, as there is so much similitude between the generality of such rings.

The next witness who appeared before the Committee, was a respectable-looking elderly woman, who deposed that her name was Mrs. Hutton, and that she had for many years resided in Cumberland near the Scottish border. She perfectly well recollected that in the Autumn of 1829, a gentleman and a lady arrived at her house, and that the lady made an arrangement for her unoccupied apartments. The lady seemed plunged into the deepest distress: the gentleman had a strange wild look—and both were young. The gentleman took his departure almost immediately after the engagement for the rooms was made. As the new lodger came totally unprovided with any effects beyond those which she had on her—and as the circumstances of their arrival, as well as their looks excited her suspicion that there was something wrong—Mrs. Hutton had listened at the door of the parlour where they bade each other farewell. She distinctly heard the young gentleman say, "*Adieu, Eliza, for ever!*"—but she could not catch the reply which the lady made. The gentleman went away. For some hours after he was gone, the lady sat statue-like as if plunged into the deepest despair. After a while she inquired for a needle and thread: she took a small piece of velvet—and therewith she made a little bag. Into this she put her watch and her wedding-ring, as well as another ring, which she took from her bosom: she cut off a long lock of her hair—which was of raven darkness; and this likewise she put into the little bag—which she then sewed up. To the bag she attached a black ribbon, which she put round her neck, securing the bag in her bosom. All this she did in the presence of Mrs. Hutton—not amidst weeping, but in the silence of cold blank despair. When her task was finished, she raised her countenance, looked at Mrs. Hutton, and said, "*This shall be for my babe, if I live to give birth to it. The contents of that bag may some day serve as a clue, if ever such be needed, when I shall be dead and gone!*"—Mrs. Hutton gently asked, "*A clue to what?*"—whereat the lady suddenly started up and fixed upon her a look so full of wild suspicion that she was frightened lest the unfortunate being was going mad. In the middle of the ensuing night the stranger lady—for she had given no name—abruptly quitted the house, leaving the front door wide open; so that Mrs. Hutton now felt convinced that grief had

really turned her brain, and she resolved to speak to the local authorities in the morning. But the lady never came back. Some time afterwards she read in an old newspaper that happened to fall into her hands, a narrative of the tragic events which had occurred at Oaklands; and she was more than half inclined to fancy that the strangers whom she had seen at her house were none other than Bertram Vivian and the Duchess Eliza: but afraid of getting into some trouble if it were known that she had held any communication with persons who were accused of such crimes, she held her peace concerning them. When now asked to describe to the Committee of Privileges the lady who had thus remained a few hours beneath her roof so many years ago, she drew a portraiture which precisely corresponded with that of the unfortunate Duchess.

The next witness was the proprietor of a lunatic asylum in Northumberland. This gentleman stated that in the fall of the year 1829—and, so far as he could recollect, about a fortnight or three weeks after the dates mentioned by Mrs. Hutton—he one morning found a lady wandering in a wild state in the fields near his establishment. He conducted her to his house; and he found that she was completely deprived of her intellect. She was no sooner located there than she sank into a deep silent brooding dejection. He made inquiries throughout the neighbourhood and advertised in several local newspapers—but could obtain not the slightest clue relative to who she was. As she was evidently a person of gentility, or at least had known better days, he and his wife took compassion on her: and when they found that she was in a way to become a mother they looked upon her as the victim of seduction who had most probably been discarded by her friends; and they therefore deemed it unnecessary—or rather, we should say, useless—to institute any additional research on her behalf. She never spoke a word—but was docile as a lamb, save and except if any one endeavoured to examine the little bag which she kept in her bosom; and then she grew frantic. They therefore for humanity's sake desisted from their endeavours to see what it contained; and still from motives of charity they kept her at their asylum. At the expiration of some weeks, however, she grew violent, and gave indications of approaching delirium. Her head was accordingly shaved: but during the night that followed, she escaped from the asylum, and was heard of by the witness no more.

The next witness produced before their lordships was Jonathan Carnabie. He deposed that he was sexton and parish-clerk at the village of Woodbridge, in Westmoreland. He recollected that in the beginning of the year 1830, he very early one morning beheld a female lying over a grave in the churchyard. He hastened to raise her: he thought that she was dead—for she was pale, cold, and rigid as a corpse. She however proved to be merely in a deep swoon. He knew that she was a lady by her appearance, though her dress was much travel-soiled—holes were worn through her shoes and stockings—her feet were cut and bleeding. Jonathan bore her off to the parsonage, which was close by the church: the clergyman and his family were absent at the time on a visit to some friends in Lancashire; and there was no one but a female-servant in the parsonage. This woman however did her best to recover the poor lady from her insensibility; and in time she succeeded. A medical man was sent for; and he at once pronounced that she was utterly bereft of her senses—that her reason was gone—that her mind was a perfect void. Indeed, her head had evidently been but very recently shaved; and it was therefore concluded she had escaped from some lunatic asylum. She had a little velvet bag attached to a ribbon round her neck; and the only sign of vital consciousness which she displayed, was when any one attempted to touch this bag. The surgeon said it was useless to excite the poor lady to frenzy by taking the little bag from her in order to open it; for that it doubtless merely contained some trinkets which had been given to amuse her at the asylum whence she had escaped—and that therefore these trinkets themselves could not be supposed to afford any clue as to who she was or whence she had come. The intelligence of the discovery of the poor lady in the churchyard speedily spread through the village, and reached the ears of a worthy gentleman of the name of Ashton, who was then residing at Woodbridge. He felt interested in the case; and he gave the poor lady a home. He watched the newspapers of Westmoreland and the surrounding counties, in order to see if any advertisement appeared describing who the lady might be: but no notification of the kind was given. She therefore became domiciled at Mr. Ashton's; and it was in the month of May, 1830, that she became the mother of twins. She never recovered her senses sufficiently to give the slightest account of herself: but she displayed the most affectionate tenderness towards her poor babes. Mr. Ashton, who was the most benevolent of men, treated her with a kindness which could not have been greater were he her father; and he bestowed his own name on the poor children. As they were twins, he resolved to give them Christian names which should have a kindred significancy, or rather similitude; and hence those names of Christian and Christina. In the month of October the poor lady died; and she was buried in the churchyard at Woodbridge,—Mr. Ashton causing the stone, with the simple inscription of "*October*, 1830," to be erected at the head of her grave. Very shortly afterwards he removed to some place about five-and-twenty miles distant; and Jonathan Carnabie heard no more of him nor of the children. In answer to leading questions that were put, the old sexton drew a portraiture of the lady, which corresponded with that of the Duchess Eliza; and he produced the baptismal certificate of the twins, their birthday being the one which, according to Christian's previous statement, they had always been wont to keep during the lifetime of Mr. Ashton.

Lord Clandon was the next witness who attended to give his evidence before the Committee of Privileges. He stated that immediately upon his return to England from India, he set off into Cumberland, and called at the house of Mrs. Hutton, where he had bidden farewell to the Duchess Eliza so many years back. Mrs. Hutton did not know him at first: but when he began instituting inquiries, she recognised him; and she grew frightened—for she had all along believed that he was really Bertram Vivian to whom the

foul deed of murder was imputed. He therefore admitted to her that he was that unfortunate individual: but he said enough to convince her that he was innocent of the crime charged against him. She then told him how the lady whom he had left at her house, had enclosed certain articles of jewellery in a little velvet bag, and how she had fled, no doubt in a state of mental aberration. Lord Clandon took his departure from that house, and prosecuted his inquiries elsewhere—but all to no effect. Finding that his efforts were useless thus far—and being bent upon adopting the earliest possible measures to make his innocence manifest before the world—he employed a trustworthy individual (who however knew not his objects and motives) to pursue those inquiries which he was resolved never to abandon until he succeeded in obtaining some trace of the long-lost Duchess, or some clue to her fate. It will be remembered that when a short time afterwards he was staying with his friend Sir William Ashton in the neighbourhood of Liverpool, on the occasion of Lettice Rodney's trial, he fell in with Crazy Jane, whom he discovered to be Jane Barclay, the principal lady's-maid of the Duchess Eliza in years gone by: he provided a comfortable home for that unfortunate creature: but in the unsettled state of her intellect, she abandoned it. At about the same time that the intelligence of her disappearance reached Lord Clandon in London, he received a communication from the trusty agent whom he had left pursuing inquiries in the northern counties. This communication was to the effect that the agent had succeeded in discovering that after the flight of the Duchess Eliza from Mrs. Hutton's abode on the border of Cumberland, the unhappy lady had been for some while an inmate of a lunatic asylum in Northumberland. Thither Lord Clandon at once proceeded from London: and he heard all that the proprietor of that asylum could tell him upon the painful subject. Having some leisure upon his hands, he renewed his own personal inquiries throughout those northern counties; and at the same time he forgot not poor Crazy Jane. Of this latter he received some intelligence; and the result thereof was the visit which he paid to Woodbridge. There—according to his wont, in prosecuting his inquiries in any new place relative to the long-lost Duchess Eliza—his first care was to examine the tombstones in the churchyard, in order to ascertain whether amidst those memorials of the dead he should chance to find one that would set at rest the mystery which enveloped the fate of the Duchess—though he then knew not whether she were still an inhabitant of this world or had gone to the next. While inspecting those grave-stones at Woodbridge, he beheld the one with the singularly laconic inscription: he fell in with Crazy Jane; and circumstances led him into communication with Jonathan Carnabie. From the old sexton's lips he learnt sufficient to clear up all the mystery which had hitherto enveloped the fate of the unfortunate Duchess. To his unspeakable wonderment he at the same time learnt that the twins Christian and Christina Ashton, whom chance had previously thrown in his way in London, were the offspring of the deceased Duchess—and they ignorant of the secret of their birth! On his return to London, he sent for Christian from Ramsgate, and gave him a home: he examined the maternal relics which the twins had preserved: he recognised the Duchess Eliza's watch: and the ring with the initial B upon it, was the same which he had given to her in the days of their love at Oxford. That Christian and Christina were the lawful offspring of the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont, there could be no doubt: but still Lord Clandon felt that the evidence which he had as yet obtained would be scarcely sufficient to prove their claims; and moreover he himself could not appear publicly in any judicial investigation until his own innocence was made manifest. In these circumstances he thought it more prudent to retain the secret of their birth from the knowledge of the twins: so that they might not be buoyed up with hopes which perhaps never would be fulfilled. But in a short time providence threw additional testimony into his hands. On the occasion of one of the visits which he made into the neighbourhood of Oaklands for purposes connected with the plans which were in progress for the development of his innocence, he fell in with a woman whom he knew not at the time, but whom a handbill subsequently proved to be the murderess Barbara Smedley. On her person a sealed packet was found; and this packet contained certain papers intimately connected with the interests of the twins.

The next witness who appeared for examination before the Committee of Privileges, was John Smedley. It will be remembered that he had surrendered himself up to justice in consequence of a handbill proclaiming that the mercy of the Crown would be to a certain degree extended to any one of the gang of miscreants connected with the house in Lambeth (the Burker himself excepted) who would give such information as should place the others in the hands of the police: or that the same benefit would be extended to that one of the same gang who would surrender up the Burker alone to the authorities. John Smedley had been the means of betraying the Burker, when disguised as a Jew, into the hands of the police; and it assuredly was not his fault that the miscreant Barney had subsequently escaped. Smedley therefore—on pleading guilty at the Old Bailey to the charge of murder, and confessing that he had helped to assassinate one Joseph Preston—had received the benefit of the royal mercy, according to the promise of the handbill; and his life being spared, he was sentenced to transportation for the remainder of his days. But inasmuch as his evidence was needed before the Committee of Privileges in respect to the Marchmont Peerage, he was retained a prisoner in Newgate instead of being immediately sent out of the country. He now therefore appeared, in the custody of turnkeys, in the presence of that Committee.

The testimony of John Smedley was to the following effect. Some time back he had at his house in Lambeth a lodger who passed by the name of Smith. This lodger desired that a letter might be taken to the address which appeared upon the envelope. It was directed to Mr. Ashton, at Mrs. Macaulay's, Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square. Smedley, his wife, and mother opened the letter instead of taking it to its address. They found by its contents that their lodger's real name was Joseph Preston—that he had lived on Cambridge Terrace—that he had sorely wronged Christian and Chris-

tina Ashton—and that under a plank in one of the rooms which he specified at his house in Cambridge Terrace, they would find documents which might be of more or less importance to themselves. In consequence of perusing this letter, Smedley and his wife went to the house in Cambridge Terrace, and possessed themselves of the documents in the hope that their deliverance into the hands of Mr. and Miss Ashton might be productive of a reward. But on inquiring at Mrs. Macaulay's house, Barbara Smedley found that the twins had left—that they had fallen into poverty—and that there was no chance of obtaining a recompense at their hands. The Smedleys however kept the papers with the idea that they would some day prove lucrative; and these were the documents, together with Joseph Preston's letter, which Lord Clandon had found in the sealed packet upon the person of Barbara Smedley.

The douments were now produced before the Committee; and Christian, be it recollected, had already proclaimed his conviction that those which bore the signature of the deceased Mr. Ashton were really in that gentleman's handwriting. One document consisted of a will which Mr. Ashton had left in favour of the twins, bequeathing them the sum of six thousand pounds, with Joseph Preston as the guardian and executor. Another document was an affectionate letter to the twins, penned by Mr. Ashton in case he should die before he considered that they had reached an age when they ought to be made acquainted with all the secrets and mysterics attending their birth. A third document, also written by the deceased Mr. Ashton, contained a full narrative of those secrets and mysteries, in precise accordance with the evidence given by Jonathan Carnabie. The remaining document was Joseph Preston's letter to the twins, which the Smedleys had intercepted. This letter informed them that, smitten with re-

morse for his conduct towards those who had been entrusted to his guardianship, he implored their forgiveness—that he was already steeped in pecuniary difficulties when he became their guardian at Mr. Ashton's death—that he had made away with the six thousand pounds bequeathed them by that gentleman—that the only atonement, slight though it were, which he could now offer, was to place them in possession of certain documents which he had found in Mr. Ashton's writing-desk, and which he had not intended to give up to them until they attained their majority—that these documents would be discovered in a peculiar recess at his house in Cambridge Terrace, for that in the precipitation of his flight from that residence he had forgotten to take them with him.

The reading of these documents terminated the evidence on behalf of our young hero as a claimant for the Marchmont Peerage. The Lords forming the Committee of Privileges, inquired if there were any opposition?—and being answered in the negative, they deliberated together for a few minutes. The result of their conference was an intimation to the counsel appearing on Christian's behalf, that it was entirely unnecessary for those learned gentlemen to address their lordships upon the evidence, as the mind of the Committee was already made up. A decision was then solemnly pronounced in Christian's favour: he was recognised as the just claimant and the rightful possessor of the Marchmont Peerage; and he thereupon received the congratulations of all who were so deeply interested in our young hero's welfare.

CHAPTER CL.

MORE EXPLANATIONS.

One of the firsts acts of Christian and Christina after the occurrence of the memorable events at Oaklands, was to proceed into Westmoreland, and visit the spot where reposed the remains of their mother. They were naturally anxious that these remains should be transferred to the family-vault of the Marchmonts, and not be suffered to lie in the obscurity of a remote church-yard: but it was suggested by Lord Claudon that this proceeding should be postponed until after the Committee of Privileges had decided upon Christian's claims, and when the complete narrative of the past would go forth to the world, fully proving the innocence of the deceased Duchess Eliza. Now, therefore, that the decision of that committee had been rendered, and that the tragic history was known in all its sad and romantic details, the wish of the twins was about to be fulfilled in all its filial piety.

A second visit was paid by the young Duke of Marchmont and Lady Christina Vivian to the little village of Woodbridge; and before the humble grave was disturbed, they went alone together to weep for the last time over that spot which had for so many years been the resting-place of their unfortunate parent. Clad in deep mourning, that amiable youth and his charming sister bent over the grave, moistening with their tears the turf which was soon to be disturbed: they knelt there, and they prayed;—long did they contemplate the stone with the laconic inscription; and embracing each other fondly, they both alike felt that if any reason were wanting to cement the affection which had hitherto subsisted between them, it was now supplied by the respect due to the memory of their perished mother. And when for some time they had been left alone at the grave, their loved and revered relative Lord Claudon joined them there;—and he too knelt and prayed—he too moistened that turf with his tears—and he too in sadness contemplated the stone-memorial which the kindness of a stranger had long years back placed at the head of that grave. It was a touching scene—and one the full pathos of which must be left to the imagination; for it cannot be described in words.

The ceremony which had brought the twins and Lord Claudon to Woodbridge, then commenced—they themselves remaining the while at the Parsonage House. The grave was opened: the coffin was exhumed and placed in a hearse that was in readiness for its reception. A mourning-coach conveyed the young Duke, his sister, and Lord Claudon to the nearest railway-station; and they proceeded with the remains of the deceased Duchess to Oaklands. There the coffin was consigned to the family-vault in the neighbouring church; and the Duchess Eliza slept by the side of her husband.

Lord Claudon had now no longer any motive for remaining in England: but before he took his departure, his nuptials with Queen Indora were solemnized. The ceremony was performed with comparative privacy, at the villa which her Majesty had occupied during her residence in London: Lady Christina Vivian, Miss Isabella Vincent, and two other young ladies belonging to one of the noblest families of the aristocracy, acted as bridesmaids. Immediately after the marriage the bridegroom and bride repaired to pass a week at Oaklands; and at the expiration of that time the moment arrived for them to take leave of those in whom they were so deeply interested. We have before said that there is no happiness in this world without its alloy; and the happiness of the newly married pair was shadowed by the necessity of separating from Christian and Christina. Indeed, when the moment of parting came, it seemed as if it were felt on both sides that they were never to see each other again; and profound was the affliction of our young heroine on receiving the farewell embrace of that royal lady towards whom she owed so large a debt of gratitude, and whom she loved so well. Lord Claudon bestowed some excellent advice upon Christian before taking leave of him—although his lordship had the fullest confidence in the rectitude of his ducal relative. The Queen and Lord Claudon took their departure, attended by a small suite, amongst which was the faithful Mark. They left the British shores to return to the Kingdom of Inderabad, where Indora was to take her seat on the throne that awaited her, and to place by her side on that regal elevation the husband whom she would make a King, and whose presence she knew would be so welcome to the millions of her subjects already enjoying the benefits of his enlightened policy.

We may here avail ourselves of an opportunity to give a few little explanations which will complete the elucidation of all the mysteries of the

past. The reader has already perceived how Indora had learnt in her own native city the real name of him who passed by the fictitious one of Clement Redcliffe—and how from the passionate language which had burst from his lips at the time, she gleaned enough to prove that he had just made the discovery of how he laboured under a frightful imputation in his own native land. After he had escaped from Inderabad she followed him to England; and she obtained an interview with him, as recorded in one of the earliest chapters in this narrative. She comprehended that he was bent upon adopting measures to prove his innocence; for she knew him too well to believe for a single instant that he could ever have been guilty of a crime. Then it was that the romantic idea of secretly succouring him in his endeavour to demonstrate that innocence, flashed to the mind of the fond and devoted Indora. But having only a dim idea of the circumstances attending that crime of which he was accused, Indora ordered Mark to procure the files of an English newspaper, that she might obtain a perfect knowledge of all that it concerned her to know. In that newspaper she read the particulars of the tragedy at Oaklands in the year 1829; and she had no difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that as Bertram Vivian himself was assuredly innocent, his brother Hugh must be the guilty person. To visit Oaklands—to behold the spot which had proved the scene of the tragedy—to glean whatsoever she might be possibly enabled to pick up—and to avail herself of any circumstances that might transpire towards the furtherance of her aims,—these were the ideas that naturally began to occupy the attention of Indora. Thus, when Madame Angelique called at Shrubbery Villa, and in the course of conversation proposed a visit to Oaklands, Indora readily accepted the offer; for though she comprehended the treacherous reason for which it was made, she had no fear of being unable to combat against the designs of the Duke of Marchmont. Besides, she wished to meet that man face to face, that she might form her own idea of his disposition, and judge to what an extent it might subsequently be worked upon through the medium of his conscience.

Now, it happened that Bertram Vivian himself, in adopting measures for the demonstration of his innocence, paid occasional stealthy visits to the neighbourhood of Oaklands,—rather perhaps to trust to the chapter of accidents, than with any precise and settled plan of action in view at the time. On the occasion of one of those visits—and being concealed amongst the trees—he to his astonishment beheld Indora walking in the grounds with the old steward. He fancied that she must have been beguiled thither by some treachery—especially as he knew that Madame Angelique had conceived designs against herself and Sagoonah—those designs of which he had given her a hint, and against which he had warned her in a brief note written from Mortimer Street. Therefore, on finding Indora at Oaklands, Bertram Vivian was resolved to watch over her safety; and he beheld her take her departure. His brother had in the meantime come to Oaklands; and Bertram could not resist the temptation of endeavouring to work upon his fears as one of the first steps towards the accomplishment of his aims. He had no difficulty in effecting a stealthy entrance into the mansion; and he happened to conceal himself in that very room to which his brother and Purvis penetrated that they might ascertain whether Indora had replaced the dagger in the drawer whence she had taken it. Bertram was fearful of being discovered; for he knew that his brother was villain enough to hand him over to the grasp of the law—and he at that time was totally unprepared with any proof of his innocence! He therefore dashed the candle from his brother's hand; and he effected his escape from the spot amidst the utter darkness in which he thus suddenly involved the room. But he had previously overheard the conversation which took place between his brother and Purvis in respect to the dagger; and the motive of Indora's visit to Oaklands began to be apparent to his mind. He saw that she had *not* been inveigled thither by treachery; and he conjectured that it was on account of his own affairs that she had come. He further surmised that she must have had some particular conversation with Purvis; and he was determined to ascertain. He therefore introduced himself stealthily in the night-time to the old steward's room: he revealed his name—and he subsequently found a faithful assistant in Purvis. The conduct of Indora made a deep impression upon Bertram's mind: it was another proof of her devoted love for him: he saw that she was labouring in his behalf; and so many evidences of her affection went far to mitigate the impression that he had mainly owed his lengthened captivity in Inderabad to the influence which she possessed with her father. After his visit to Woodbridge and his discovery that the Duchess Eliza had long been dead, he waited upon Indora at her villa; and he then informed her that the circumstances which had previously prevented him from giving her aught beyond a vague hope, had ceased to exist. The reader now comprehends the real significancy of some of those incidents which at the time of their occurrence were involved in a certain degree of mystery.

We need hardly add that liberal rewards were bestowed—not only by Lord Clandon, but also by the young Duke of Marchmont—upon all those to whom they had any reason to experience gratitude. The proprietor of the lunatic asylum in Northumberland, who had so charitably given a home to the unfortunate Duchess Eliza, had every ground to be satisfied with the liberality of Christian and Lord Clandon: Jonathan Carnabie went back to Woodbridge with more than sufficient to enable him to live without work, if he thought fit, for the remainder of his days; and Purvis, the faithful old steward, was likewise a special object of the bounty of those whom he had served. Over the grave of the deceased Mr. Ashton a monument was erected, bearing a beautifully composed tribute of the gratitude of the twins for the true paternal kindness which they had received from one to whom they were in no way related.

Now that Queen Indora had left England, Christina took up her abode altogether with her brother at Marchmont House; and there they were visited by all the *elite* of the aristocracy—as well as by several friends whom Christian had acquired previous to the occurrence of those events which had proclaimed the secret of his birth. Thus,

for instance, Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley, Sir Frederick and Lady Latham, and Captain Stanley were frequent visitors at Marchmont House: nor must we omit to observe that Sir William Stanley himself, when passing any time in the metropolis, was a welcome guest in Belgrave Square. Lord Octavian Meredith and Zoe still remained abroad: but frequently did Christina correspond with her friend, Armytage's daughter, who indeed had proved one of the very first to send written congratulations to both herself and her brother on their elevation to a brilliant position. The nuptials of Christian with Isabella Vincent were to take place when six months should have elapsed from the date of the events at Oaklands; and in the meantime the young lovers frequently saw each other.

One day a cab drove up to the door of Marchmont House: but the occupant of it would not immediately get out. She—for this occupant was of the feminine gender—was attired in her Sunday apparel: she appeared in all the glory of a new silk gown, a very fashionable bonnet, her gold watch and chain, and a pair of lemon-coloured kid gloves. She delivered a message to one of the domestics,—which the man forthwith took up to the young Duke and Lady Christina Vivian. It was to the effect that Mrs. Macaulay requested permission to pay her most dutiful respects to his Grace and to Lady Christina. The twins at once desired that she should be shown up; and the domestic accordingly proceeded to hand Mrs. Macaulay out of the cab with every demonstration of respect.

As she followed the footman through the marble hall and up the superb staircase, she could not help giving half audible utterance to the thoughts which were passing in her mind.

"Well," said the worthy woman, "this is indeed a palace!—and only think that I should have what's called the *entrée* of it, and be treated by this powdered and lace-bedizened gentleman"—thus alluding to the lacquey—"just for all the world as if I myself was a real lady! Ah, what a splendid palace!—and what a lodging-house it would make! Why, there must be at least a dozen sets of apartments on the first floors alone! They'd let each at four guineas a week:—four times twelve are forty-eight—that's forty-eight guineas a week!—and one might add another twenty guineas for the letting of the upper rooms! Only conceive such a lodging-house! it would be a fortune in a single year! And the quantities of cold victuals that would be left and never asked for! Why, if every lodger only left the leg of a fowl, and a single glass of wine in his decanter, it would keep a regiment! And then too, people living in such a house would never think of locking their tea-caddies, and marking the cheese and the bread to see that the servants didn't touch them! Oh, what a lodging-house!"

Mrs. Macaulay was lost in mingled awe and wonderment at the vast field which she had thus opened for her own contemplation; and the probability is that she would have gone on wondering as long as there were any more stairs to ascend, if the domestic had been conducting her to the top of the house. But as he halted on the first landing, and threw open a door to announce in a very loud voice "Mrs. Macaulay,"—the worthy woman suddenly regained her self-possession, and gathered herself together as it were for her appearance before the twins.

Although she had mustered the courage to pay this visit, she felt by no means certain with regard to the nature of the reception she should experience. She knew that she might reckon upon being received with civility: but judging the world according to her own somewhat circumscribed notions, she fancied that the young Duke would prove coldly dignified and Lady Christina politely distant. Great was her surprise, therefore—and infinite her joy—when the young Duke and his sister, hastening forward, caught each a hand, and gave her the kindest welcome. They had not seen her since their change of circumstances: for immediately after the events at Oaklands Christian had taken up his abode at Marchmont House—and Lord Clandon, after his release from Newgate, had repaired to the same destination; so that there had been no occasion for our young hero to call at the lodging-house in Mortimer Street. When she found that she thus experienced so friendly a reception, Mrs. Macaulay could not keep back her tears; and she whimpered out her thanks, as well as her congratulations on the change of circumstances which had overtaken the twins.

"Dear me!" she said, sinking down upon a sofa, "to think that I should live to see you, Master Christian, a Duke—and you, Miss Christina, a lady! But I always thought there was something distinguished about you both; and I said so to Mrs. Wanklin, and to Mrs. Chowley, which keeps the baby-linen warehouse in the Tottenham Court Road. Well, dear me! what strange things do happen in this life! You remember Captain Bluff, my lord? Well, he got promoted from a Gravesend steamer to a Margate one; and then he was so high and mighty that he refused to marry Miss Chowley; and so she went into hysterics, while her mother went off to her lawyer. And then there was an action for breach of promise; and I was summoned as a witness to appear before the bigwigs at Westminster Hall. I'm sure I never should have passed through the ordeal if it hadn't been that I had previously taken a little drop of rum which my new lodger had left in his bottle the night before."

"And pray how did it all end?" asked Christian, with a smile.

"Why, Captain Bluff proved that he had never promised, but had only thrown sheep's-eyes at the young lady. So he left the court triumphant, with a lot of Margate and Ramsgate steam-boat Captains; and they had a grand dinner at Blackwall—while Mrs. Chowley had to pay all the costs. Ah! it made a hole into the profits of the baby-linen, I can tell you! But dear me, to think that Mr. Redcliffe should have been a lord after all—and that since he should have married a Queen! So I've had a real Duke and a real Lord living at my house; and all the neighbours look up to me as something very superior indeed."

"And what of your friend Mrs. Sifkin?" asked Christian, still speaking with a smile at Mrs. Macaulay's garrulity.

"Oh! she and me are more at loggerheads than ever," responded the worthy woman: "she's so jealous and envious, you know!—and when she hears from the neighbours how I've had the

honour of being received here to-day, I'm sure it will drive her stark staring mad, if anything in this world *can!* I hesitated at first whether to come and pay my respects: but at last I said to my new servant, says I, 'Jane, Captain Flasher'—that's my new lodger—'Captain Flasher doesn't dine at home to-day: so you may just give me an early dinner off his cold beef—which won't keep till to-morrow—and then I'll prank myself off and go and call at Marchmont House.'—Captain Flasher is a very nice man, and doesn't think of locking up the tea-caddy or decanting his own wine, or any meanness of that sort. Ah, my lord, you remember those odious Johnsons, who had my second floor? Well, they've actually gone to live with Mrs. Sifkin; and I'm so glad of it! It's almost the worst punishment I could wish the woman for all her slander and bad conduct towards myself. They'll punish her with their meanness, I'll be bound!"

In this manner did Mrs. Macaulay rattle on until the young Duke and Lady Christina Vivian began to get tired of her gossip,—when they gave her luncheon; and she shortly afterwards took her departure, bearing with her several presents which the twins made her. On returning to her own abode, she purposely got up a wrangle with the cabman in respect to the amount of the fare, in order that she might have an opportunity of reminding him over and over again, that she had been to Marchmont House and back. Her object was thus to proclaim the fact not merely for the immediate behoof of her neighbours, but likewise for that of passers-by: and when she had said the same thing in a very loud voice a dozen times over, she ended by paying the cabman his full demand, with sixpence extra,—a piece of generosity on her part which must be taken as a proof of the excellent humour into which her visit had put her.

A couple of days after the visit of Mrs. Macaulay, the young Duke of Marchmont was favoured with the company of some other old acquaintances. It was about two o'clock when three individuals, of unmistakable foreign aspect, presented themselves at the entrance of the mansion in Belgrave Square. Their raiment was not remarkable for any of those attractions which constitute "fashion" in respect to the masculine garb. On the contrary, it seemed as if the Holywell Street of some Continental city might be referred to as the source whence emanated the garments of those three personages. Truth compels us to declare that they looked as if they were the most devoted disciples of the Genius of Seediness. As for linen, an exceeding maliciousness might be inclined to represent that they wore none at all; though a more charitable surmise would only go to the extent that it was too dirty to be displayed. Their coats were buttoned completely up to their throats; and neither inside their stocks of rusty black nor the sleeves of those coats could the slightest glimpse be caught of linen, calico, or long-cloth. At the same time that they presented themselves at the entrance of Marchmont House, the hall-porter became aware of a somewhat strong odour, compounded of onions, tobacco-smoke, and perspiration; and he made a wry face, for his nostrils were unaccustomed to such a scent in the aristocratic region of Belgrave Square.

The three worthies at once saw that the porter both sniffed and eyed them suspiciously: whereat they drew themselves up with the mightiest airs of importance—and with their somewhat dirty hands began stroking their beards and playing with their moustaches. Then one of the gentlemen said to the porter, "We sall be calling for to ask for his Grace, de yong Duke of Marchmont."

"His Grace is engaged," answered the porter somewhat curtly, although he was naturally a very civil, obliging, and well-behaved man: for otherwise he would not have been retained in Christian's service.

"Den we sall be for to wait," said the individual who was acting as spokesman. "You not know us. We vare great men in our own country—great men in our Faderland."

The porter looked as if he thought that it was a great pity they ever came out of their Fatherland: for he was by no means inclined to believe that they could be great personages in England.

"You sall be having de honour of knowing me, mine goot mans," continued the spokesman. "We are de Chevalier Gumbinnen, de Lord Chamberlain of dat high and mighty Prince de reiguing Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Dis am de Chevalier Kadger, de Equerry to de same Grand Duke; and dis am de Count Frumpenhausen, de Gold Tick to him Royal Highness de vare same Grand Duke."

The hall porter placed his hand to his forehead with a bewildered air, as all these magnificent titles were as mercilessly and overpoweringly hurled at him: but still there was that exceedingly unaristocratic odour infecting the atmosphere, and producing with the unfortunate hall-porter a sensation of sickness.

"What do these fellows want?" asked a powdered lacquey, coming forward. "There! be off with you, my good man," he added, proffering the Chevalier Gumbinnen a few pence. "The police are very strict in respect to beggars and vagrants in this quarter of the town; and if you are taken up you will be sent to the House of Correction."

"Beggars, begar!" cried the Chevalier Gumbinnen, plunging his fingers into his whiskers, grasping them wildly, and tearing at them as if they were mad. "De insult is one for which you sall be sent off vid one flea in your ear! You mans not know us. We vare great men in our country—we vare rich—we great lords—we belong to de Court of de brudder of your Prince Albert."

The footman stared at this announcement for a moment; but suddenly bursting out into a laugh, he said good-naturedly, "Well, you are three of the rummest fellows for begging impostors that I ever saw!"

The Chevalier Gumbinnen gave vent to his rage in another attack upon his red whiskers: but the Chevalier Kadger stepped forward, presenting a very dirty card, and saying, "You sall take dis to your master, young mans; and you sall soon see de wonderful effect dis name sall be for producing."

"You had better take up the card, John," said another lacquey, who had just stepped forward, and who spoke these words in an audible tone. "I have heard something of these fellows before."

The footman to whom the card was given, accordingly took it up to the drawing-room where Christian was seated,—Christina being engaged with some young lady-friends in the music-room at the time.

Our young hero was astonished as well as annoyed to find that his former acquaintances of Mivart's Hotel had turned up again. He however thought it would be too discourteous to refuse to grant them an interview; and he bade the footman conduct them up to the drawing-room. The three Germans accordingly made their appearance —and a very shabby one it was. The young Duke of Marchmont could not help thinking that if they were really still attached to the household of the reigning Sovereign of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, the fortunes of that high and mighty potentate must have experienced considerable dilapidation. But he had not many instants for any deliberate reflection at all,—inasmuch as the Chevalier Gumbinnen darted forward and seized Christian in an embrace, with which, considering the mingled savour of onions, cubas, and perspiration, he could have very well dispensed.

"Mine vare goot friend!" exclaimed the Chevalier; "you sall be for breaking mine heart with vare great joy for again to see you!"

"Begar! his Grace sall have much improved! Him quite de great nobleman!"—and now it was the Chevalier Kadger who took his turn in bestowing an affectionate embrace.

"Mine noble friends! mine vare goot friends!" cried Frumphenhausen, preparing to inflict the same token of warm feeling towards the young Duke: but he was disappointed—for Christian, finding these compliments to be intolerable, hastily stepped behind the table; and pointing to chairs, requested his three visitors to be seated.

The Chevalier Gumbinnen—who at the time of their former acquaintance could scarcely speak a word of English, but who had since picked up a crude smattering thereof—continued to act as spokesman. He explained how delighted himself and his companions were when on arriving in England a few days back, they accidentally learnt that the former secretary to their illustrious master was now Duke of Marchmont. The Chevalier went on to say that the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was coming in the course of the week to pass some little time in the British metropolis; and that his Royal Highness had therefore sent over those three officers of his household to have everything in readiness at Mivart's Hotel by the time of his arrival. Hence their presence in London; and as a matter of course (according to the Chevalier Gumbinnen's account) they could not possibly avoid the pleasure of paying their respects to the Duke of Marchmont.

Christian listened with a cold reserve: for he knew very well that Gumbinnen, though in England a Chevalier and a Lord Chamberlain, was when in Germany nothing but a valet—that the Chevalier Kadger, in England an equerry, was in Germany a footman—and that Frumpenhausen, a Count and a Gold Stick when on his travels, was in his own native land a lacquey with a brass-headed cane. The young Duke of Marchmont moreover knew that these beggarly fellows were capable of any meanness in order to obtain money or refreshments; and that although they could not help their miserable poverty yet that they had no right to assume the titles and the consequence which they affected on the British soil. He was resolved therefore not to offer them so much even as a glass of wine, nor to give them any encouragement to renew their visit.

"You vare nice house here, milor," said the Chevalier Gumbinnen, looking around the room. "You sall be remembering de bottles of wine we was used to drink togeder when we was such vare goot friends. Ah, mine goot lord! dat was at de hotel: but now you sall be having de wine in your own cellar; and all you sall have to do is just for to ring de bell, and up comes the champagne. It vare hot to-day—and me vare tirsty."

"Begar! it sall be vare hot," said the Chevalier Kadger; "and dat—how you call it?—de lonch which we sall have eaten was vare salt. We sall be vare dry! Yes—himmel! me be tirsty as de dayvil."

Not choosing to take any of these hints, Christian said, "I saw your friend Baron Raggidbak some time ago, in a condition——"

"Ah! dat Raggidbak vare great raskal!" ejaculated Gumbinnen: "him great scamp—him big tief—him vare bad man indeed!"

"Him dam bad!" added the Chevalier Kadger emphatically.

"Him make way wid de splendid harness of his Royal Highness!" cried Frumpenhausen.

"I believe," said Christian, very quietly addressing himself to the Count, "that you had some little unpleasant adventure at Buckingham Palace on the night of the supper?—or at least such was the rumour on the occasion."

"It all lies!" exclaimed Frumpenhausen, colouring tremendously. "De peoples sall be vare scandalous at times about us great folks. De Inglis newspapers vare wicked! dey tell de great lies! If dey was in our Faderland, dey go to gaol, and de journals dey sall be—what you call it?—suppressed! Me tell your lordship one great, great secret," continued Frumpenhausen, assuming a most confidential air. "His Royal Highness our Grand Duke he sall be coming over to dis country for to make de representations—you understand, milor?—to his vare goot brudder de Prince Albert, dat de Inglis press too free; and you sall be for seeing dat de Prince Albert use his influence wid de Gobernment to put down your free press."

"Never!" exclaimed Christian warmly. "If the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha entertains such an idea, he never was more mistaken in his life. As for me, I am without prejudices: but since you have assumed an air of confidence, I must tell you very plainly that judging from what I saw of your master when I was in his service, the less frequently he visits the British realm, the more agreeable ought it to be to the British people."

"Vare goot! vare goot!" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "De oftener he sall come to England, de more agreeable to de British peoples! Dat is excellent! But sall I ring de bell, milor, for dat wine you was so kind for to offer us, as we are so tirsty?"

"I must tell you very frankly," answered the Duke of Marchmont, rising from his seat, "that I have no longer any time to bestow upon you."

"Vare goot!" exclaimed the Chevalier Gum-

binnen: "dat is excellent! You vare sorry, milor, your time sall be so precious. Well den, we no intrude. Ah, begar! me forgot my purse! Me have some tings to buy for his Royal Highness; and your Grace sall be so goot as to be for going to lend me de five guineas I sall be wanting."

"You must apply to some one else as your banker," answered Christian coldly.

"Ah! vare goot!" cried the Chevalier Gumbinnen: "we sall be for going to de banker! We sall be too late; and we sall be for taking de cab. Your Grace sall be so goot as to lend us de loose silver for to pay for de cab."

Christian disdainfully tossed some silver upon the table; and there was immediately a scramble on the part of those high officers attached to the Court of the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Our young hero, infinitely disgusted, rang the bell somewhat violently, and walked to the window. The Count and the two Chevaliers shook their heads at one another, as much as to imply that they had got all they could expect from the young nobleman: and they accordingly took their departure from Marchmont House. Adjourning to some tavern in the neighbourhood, they forthwith began to regale themselves on tobacco and pots of beer—in which refreshments they expended the whole of the money received from Christian.

It was perfectly true that they had come to prepare the way for the arrival of that wretched ducal pauper, the master whom they served; and were it not that the proprietor of Mivart's Hotel was afraid of offending the British Court and Aristocracy, apartments in that establishment would *not* have been placed at the disposal of the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha and his suite of beggarly tatterdemalions. We should add that the fellow calling himself Count Frumpenhausen, had been reinstated in the favour of the Grand Duke after the supper-adventure at Buckingham Palace, and that on coming over to England on this present occasion it was hoped that incident would have been forgotten. Great therefore was the vexation of the two Chevaliers and Count on finding that the young Duke of Marchmont made allusion thereto in so pointed a manner.

CHAPTER CLI.

CAPTAIN STANLEY.

The reader cannot have forgotten how Captain Stanley rescued Christina from the power of the Burker in the lane near Shrubbery Villa, Notting Hill. The young officer was at once smitten with a feeling of interest on behalf of that beauteous girl; and he had solicited permission to call at the villa. Christina had assured him that Queen Indora would give him a welcome reception; and she thus, with the strictest propriety and modesty, avoided the encouragement of a visit to herself specially. But almost immediately after that incident which rendered them acquainted, came the hurricane of events that was to accomplish so material a change in the circumstances of the twins. For some few weeks Captain Stanley saw Christina no more: but after awhile he met her again at Marchmont House; and the interest he had at first experienced in her, quickly expanded into a still more tender feeling.

Now in his twenty-fifth year, Robert Stanley was remarkably handsome. His countenance not only possessed the perfection of masculine beauty—but it likewise seemed as a mirror to reflect all the generous emotions of his soul. Of the highest principles, of untarnished reputation, of a lofty intelligence, and of fascinating manners—as well as being the heir to a wealthy baronetcy—Captain Stanley might have almost made his own choice of a wife amongst the beauties of the society which by his position he frequented: but never until he beheld Christina had he seen one of her sex who made any impression upon his heart. It was therefore a first love that he now experienced; and the more he was enabled to study the character and disposition of the young Duke of Marchmont's sister, the better did he appreciate her worth, and the more did she become endeared to him by her many amiable qualities.

A strong friendship had sprung up between the young Duke of Marchmont and Captain Stanley; and the latter therefore gladly availed himself of this circumstance to visit frequently at the mansion in Belgrave Square. The regiment to which he belonged was now quartered at Hounslow; and therefore a short ride at any time took the young officer to Marchmont House. Notwithstanding the manly frankness of his disposition, there was a considerable degree of diffidence associated with the feelings of his love for Christina. The natural delicacy of his mind moreover suggested to him that he ought not to proffer his attentions too pointedly while the young lady still wore a deep mourning garb on account of the incidents that had lately occurred at Oaklands; and the same reason prevented him from confidentially whispering to her brother that her beauty and her good qualities had made so strong an impression upon his heart. Thus, as several weeks passed on, the young Duke of Marchmont suspected not that Robert Stanley was enamoured of his sister; while Lady Christina Vivian herself was equally unsuspicious that she had thus become the object of his attachment.

Six months had now elapsed since the memorable events at Oaklands; and the period fixed for the nuptials of the young Duke of Marchmont and Miss Isabella Vincent was close at hand. Previous to the arrival of the happy moment, Christian resolved to pass a week or ten days at Oaklands, that he might there entertain a select party of his numerous friends. Christina as a matter of course accompanied her brother; and amongst the guests were Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley, Sir Frederick and Lady Anastatia Latham, and Captain Stanley. Isabella Vincent was remaining at her mansion at Kensington, in company with an elderly female relative, making preparations for the bridal: Sir William Stanley was invited to join the party at Oaklands—but he had previously been summoned to London by the Government for some purpose with which his son remained unacquainted. We should observe that Sir William was a man of considerable influence in the northern counties,—one of which he had until within the last few years represented in

Parliament: but having been compelled to visit India, he had at the time given up his senatorial duties, and since his return from the East had found no opportunity of resuming them.

When the party assembled at Oaklands, Captain Stanley began to think that the time had now arrived when he might with propriety afford indications that he aspired to Christina's hand. The nuptials of the young Duke were approaching—the period for mourning was expiring—there was gaiety at the ducal country seat; and Stanley considered that it was no longer necessary to veil his feelings towards Christina so studiously as he had hitherto done. Be it understood that he was utterly unacquainted with everything that had passed between herself and Lord Octavian Meredith: he knew not that her affections had ever been in the slightest degree engaged; and though he had as yet no reason to flatter himself that he had made any impression upon her heart, he nevertheless imagined the field to be fairly open for an honourable courtship. He reflected, however, that a lady of Christina's rank—the sister of a Duke—might well aspire to a lofty alliance; and that both she and her brother might look forward to the time when an aristocratic coronet might by marriage grace her brows. But on the other hand Robert Stanley likewise knew that Christina had no ambition; and that where she fixed her affections, she would bestow her hand. He was likewise aware that her brother would consult her happiness rather than her interests in a more worldly sense; and thus he had no fear that his addresses would be repudiated on the ground that Lady Christina Vivian aimed at a loftier alliance.

It was on the second morning after the arrival of the party at Oaklands, that Christina rose early and rambled forth by herself in the grounds. The spring season was yielding to the warmer influence of summer: nature was all smiling around her: the spacious gardens were embellished with the choicest floral beauties—the birds were carolling blithely in the trees—the fountains were catching in their crystal jets the beams of the orient sun. The dew was still upon the grass: there was a sweet freshness in the air; and the young lady felt her spirits rise as she passed through those beauteous grounds belonging to the immense domain that owned the lordship of her brother. Proceeding beyond the gardens, she entered the fields—and insensibly continued her ramble farther than she had intended when first setting out. Presently she reached a stile, at which point she halted to survey the undulating landscape that lay beyond—when all of a sudden so strange a figure emerged from behind the hedge that Lady Christina was startled, and almost affrighted.

This was a tall woman whose emaciated frame was wrapped in the rags of beggary. In reality she was not forty years of age: but she looked at least fifty—so terrible were the ravages which houseless wanderings, care, misery, and privation had made upon her. She was emaciated to such a degree that there seemed to be naught but skin upon her bones: her cheeks had fallen in—her eyes were deeply set in their cavernous sockets—and her hair was grizzled. In respect to garments—if mere rags could be so denominated—they were only just sufficient for the purposes of decency. But there was not only misery expressed in the appearance of this creature; there was also a certain wildness of look which bespoke incipient madness or else a reckless desperation. But there was still in her dark eyes a remnant of the light which had belonged to them in other days:—and when, on so suddenly starting up from behind the hedge, she flung her glances on Christina, there was something which appeared so threatening in them that it was no wonder if the young lady felt still more frightened than she even was at first.

Christina flung a look around; she was at a considerable distance from the mansion; and no other human being but this horrible woman was within sight. Christina was smitten with the dread of being exposed to the fury of some dangerous lunatic; and though by no means inclined to childish terrors, yet she could not help wishing that she had not wandered so far from home. It was however as much from charitable motives as from this feeling of apprehension that Christina hastily thrust her hand into her pocket to draw forth her purse; and taking thence two or three pieces of silver, she proffered them to the woman. But in so doing she showed that her purse contained gold as well: and on raising her looks towards the wretched stranger's countenance, her fears were all revived or rather most poignantly enhanced at the manner in which the woman was now surveying her.

"You belong to that proud mansion," said the woman; "and you are Lady Christina Vivian. You know not how much both you and your brother are indebted to me for the recovery of your rights. But if you did know it, you would not offer me—or at least you *ought* not to offer me those miserable silver coins when your purse contains so much gold!"

"Who can you possibly be," asked Christina in astonishment, "that you in any way contributed to the results of which you have spoken? Show me that you really did what you proclaim——"

"Ah, I spoke foolishly!" ejaculated the woman: "it is not for me to tell you who I am. But by my appearance you can judge enough," she continued, with deep concentrated bitterness, "to understand that I am not amongst the fortunate ones of this life. For months past I have endured sufficient misery to crush the very life out of me,—a misery so great that if its amount were divided amongst a dozen different people, the proportion would still be intolerable for each! How often think you, young lady, that within those months of which I am speaking I have closed my eyes in rest beneath a sheltering roof? How often, think you, that I have sunk down exhausted beneath hedges or haystacks—or dragged myself painfully through fields or along roads the live-long night? And during the whole winter how much frightful wretchedness do you think has been mine? But no matter! You rich and great ones think little of the sufferings of your fellow-creatures——"

"This is not altogether true," answered Christina, gently and compassionately. "I can without the imputation of vanity or unmerited self-applause declare that never has either my brother or myself become aware of a case of distress without alleviating it."

"Then give me that gold!" cried the woman sharply,—"that gold which is in your purse! You never knew a case of distress so bitter as mine!

surrounded by comforts of every kind, and rapidly recovering her health and strength, had every reason to bless the generosity of Isabella Vincent. The young lady returned to the metropolis,—having previously learnt by letter a sufficiency of the startling incidents which had occurred at Oaklands, to comprehend how important a change had taken place in the circumstances of Christian and Christina. And now some months elapsed—which interval brings us down to the date of the circumstances that occupied the preceding chapter.

CHAPTER CLIII.

LAST SCENE WITH THE GERMANS.

The week which was to be passed at Oaklands by the young Duke of Marchmont, his sister, and their guests had expired; and the twins returned to London. The day fixed for the nuptials of our young hero and Isabella was close at hand: but before we come to that point of our story, there is an incident to relate.

It was the day before the one that was to render Christian so supremely happy—and at about two o'clock in the afternoon—when, as he was seated in the drawing-room, a footman entered to announce that the three noblemen who some little while back visited his Grace, had called to solicit another audience. The footman—making sure that the Duke of Marchmont would receive them—had already ushered them as far as the outer drawing-room; and he now stood upon the threshold, holding the door half open.

"Tell those persons," said the young Duke, "that I am engaged. I decline to see them."

"Vare goot!" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen, now pushing past the footman into Chris-

tian's presence. "His Grace he sall say be by no means engaged; and his lordship he vell inclined to see his vare goot friends what sall be for loving him so vell."

The Lord Chamberlain of that high and mighty potentate, the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, looked, if possible, more seedy than ever, and brought with him his accustomed odour of raw onions, strong cubas, and intense perspiration. He was followed by the Chevalier Kadger, who kept his right arm most mysteriously held to his side—the real truth being that there was under the armpit a rent which would have looked most unseemly when about the person of the Equerry to a reigning Duke; and it would have moreover betrayed a fact that it was just as well to keep concealed: namely, that his Excellency the Chevalier Kadger wore no shirt. Count Frumpenhausen brought up the rear; and as he had a cold, he was seized with a sneezing fit, which compelled him to blow his nose: but he was particularly cautious to turn round while using his handkerchief, which was a mere dirty remnant of a faded cotton one.

Intense was the Duke of Marchmont's disgust on beholding these three beggarly followers of a beggarly German Prince thus insolently force their way into his presence. For the first time perhaps since he himself had borne a ducal title, he assumed a hauteur most coldly dignified; and he said to the Chevalier Gumbinnen, "You have wilfully misinterpreted the words I uttered to my domestic. I do not court the acquaintance of either yourself or your companions."

"Ah, vare goot, my lord!" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "Your Grace sall be for doing one vare great favour to dat august Duke who you was once de secretare to, and who sall be so graciously pleased for to honour your Grace vid him friendship."

"We sall be for letting your Grace know," Count Frumpenhausen hastened to interject, "dat we come on de special message from his Royal Highness——Hein?"

"If that be so," said Christian, "hasten and explain yourselves; for my time is too valuable to be wasted."

"His Royal Highness," resumed the Chevalier Gumbinnen, in his capacity of spokesman, "sall be for to find himself—how you say it?—in der dayvil of a mess. His Royal Highness he sall lose in de voyage by de steamer, tree large tronks so full of his clotes dat you sall not be able for to thrust in de pin betwixt dem. Dey all tree sall be tumble overboard in one vare great lurch of de steamer—and all through de vare one great fault of de captain. But dat not all: de worser sall be for to come. De vare large strong-box full of de gelt, and de stars and orders of his Royal Highness, go down in one of dem tronks!"

"And what do you require of me?" asked Christian, half coldly, half impatiently.

"Himmel!" ejaculated the Chevalier Kadger, shrugging his shoulders, but keeping his right arm fixed as if it were nailed to his side.

"His Royal Highness," continued Gumbinnen, "not choose for to tell his vare goot brudder, de Prince Albert, of all dese mishaps; and derefore his Royal Highness sall be for honouring his vare goot friend de Duke of Marchmont by asking for de loan of a tousand guineas and de address of his Grace's tailor. Himmel, my lord! dat is de whole fact. Kadger sall be for to prove it——"

"And Count Frumpenhausen to swear to it," added our hero ironically.

"Begar! You doubt us, my lord?" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "Come, den, and see his Royal Highness; and you sall be for learning dat it all de fact. We was for saying to his Royal Highness dat we had seen de yong Duke de oder day—dat he receive us so kind—and dat he ask us to come anoder day and take de lonch wit him. So den his Royal Highness he sall say, 'Vare goot! Go to mine yong friends; tell him what for I sall be wanting his assistance, and how he sall be for sending me de tousand guineas and de name of his tailor.'——Hein?"

"Listen, gentlemen," said our young hero. "The tale you have just told me about the loss of the trunks is one which carries deception on the face of it. Your Grand Duke is as contemptible as yourselves—particularly in respect to the mode by which he seeks to replenish his purse. Unfortunately for the British people, he is really a German Grand Duke; and we all know it to our cost: for he never visits England without having his expenses paid from our national treasury."

Here the Chevalier Gumbinnen thought it becoming, as the Grand Duke's representetive, to assume the indignant; and with a loudly ejaculated "Begar!" he advanced so close up to Christian in order to give effect to the words he was about to utter, that the strong odour which he carried about him was most sickeningly overpowering. The young Duke hastened to the window and threw it up. Just at that very moment a Punch and Judy show was passing in the Square; and it halted, immediately under the window. Then there arose a sound of the big drum and the Pandæan pipes (vulgarly called a mouth organ): the young Duke tossed out half-a-crown, at the same time waving his hand for the itinerants to depart—when it struck him that he recognised the lean gaunt form, as well as the pinched hungry countenance, of the individual who was making that music. A second glance convinced his Grace that he was right. Yes!—there, with the mouth-organ tucked into his neckcloth, and the huge drum suspended by a cord over his shoulders—looking most excruciatingly unhappy—but still the most ludicrous picture of misery that can possibly be conceived—stood that once eminent and distinguished man, Baron Raggidbak!

"There!" exclaimed Christian; "there is one of your late friends!—a person who I have no doubt is in every way as deserving of a title—or of a prison for vagabondage, no matter which, as yourselves!"

The Chevalier Gumbinnen, the Chevalier Kadger, and Count Frumpenhausen rushed to the window; and thence they beheld the discarded Groom of the Stole Baron Raggidbak. The Baron himself, having his eyes turned upward while running his lips along the reeds of the mouth-organ, caught sight of his three acquaintances; and a malignant expression appeared on his previously rueful countenance. Then, too, he recognised in the young Duke of Marchmont the late secretary of his Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-

Quotha ; and some person amongst the crowd that was collecting around the Punch and Judy show, exclaimed, "There ! that's the young Duke!—that's the handsome young gentleman who a few months back inherited the Marchmont Peerage !"

"Mine Gott!" muttered Raggidbak to himself: "de yong mans sall now go for to be a Duke!"—then raising his voice, he shouted out, "Come down, you dam rascals! What for you iu de palace of one great Duke? Him an Inglis Duke! —you de shabby beggarly flonkies of de one great pauper German Duke! Ah, you go tell him Royal Highness dat me get dronk and me sell de plate off de harness! Oh, you vare great dam rascals !"

While Baron Raggidbak was thus relieving his mind of its spiteful and vindictive feelings towards the three officials of the puissant German Prince, those individuals themselves stood transfixed in astonishment and dismay at the window. When he had finished his ejaculatory objurgations, Baron Raggidbak wound all up with a wild flourish upon the mouth organ, and such a terrific blow upon the big drum that the parchment was cracked. The individual whose duty it was to stand iu front of the show and carry on a pleasant discourse with Mr. Punch, was so incensed at this wanton destruction of property, that he seized upon the cudgel with which Punch was wont to inflict personal chastisement upon Judy, and he aimed a terrific blow at the sconce of Baron Raggidbak. But this illustrious personage—who now seemed inspired with a new life of some kind or another—dexterously warded off the blow, seized upon the staff, and therewith struck the Punch and Judy man to the ground—thus in a moment avenging many an insult, cuff, gibe, and practical joke which he had previously submitted to with a sullen and morose resignation. Then tossing away the mouth-organ, slipping the drum off his neck, and giving it a terrific kick which smashed in the hitherto uninjured side, he darted away as fast as his legs could carry him.

All this was the work of a very few moments; and the crowd, hugely delighted at the whole scene, cheered most lustily.

"Now," said Christian, abruptly closing the window, and addressing himself in a peremptory manner to his three German visitors, "I order you to retire;—and I have further to inform you that if you again present yourselves at my residence, you will find the doors closed against you."

"Begar!" exclaimed the Chevalier Kadger, gesticulating violently, so that forgetting any longer to hold his arm tight to his side, he displayed the rent which he had hitherto so studiously concealed: "dis vare great insult sall be for to have satisfaction ! Dis sall be mine friend;"—and he pointed to the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "Me fight mit de broadsword—and me pink you troo and troo——himmel !"

"Vare goot !" ejaculated Count Frumpenhausen, displaying his tattered kerchief, he being seized with a violent sneezing fit at the moment. "Dis sall be one duel—or you, my lord, sall be for making de apology—which, begar! sall be for de best; and you sall be for ordering de bottles of wine—de port and sherries; so we sall all make it up and be vare goot friends. It not de first time, my lord, you find us vare goot gumpany."

The young Duke of Marchmont rang the bell violently; and when a footman answered the summons, he exclaimed, "Show these persons from the house; and tell the hall-porter to take care that they never again cross my threshold."

Nothing could exceed the rage of the three Germans on hearing this mandate issued. The Chevalier Gumbinnen thrust his hands into his hair, and tore at it violently, as if he were madly intent on tearing out masses by the roots: and then, with a loud "Begar!" he rushed towards Christian to deal him a blow. But the footman sprang forward, at the same time shouting for help; and seizing the Chevalier Gumbinnen by the coat-collar at the back part of the neck, he forced him from the room. Two other tall powerful footmen instantaneously made their appearance: they laid hands upon the Chevalier Kadger and Count Frumpenhausen in a similar manner, and ejected them in the same style. When once out of their ducal master's sight, the three footmen gave free vent to their antipathies against the Germans; and from the top of the stairs to the bottom it was a series of kicks respectively administered to the hinder-quarters of those three retainers of the high and mighty Prince, the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Through the spacious hall were the miserable Germans thus ignominiously urged along—until they were finally expelled, each with a good parting kick, from the portals of the mansion,—the whole scene being to the infinite amusement of the domestics who administered the chastisement, as well as of the others who were lounging in the hall at the time.

Now, the usage which the three Germans thus experienced, was certainly somewhat of the roughest; and the consequences were displayed in the condition of their apparel as they made their forced and ignominious exit from the ducal mansion. The Chevalier Gumbinnen had the seat of his pantaloons most uncomfortably rent; and as his coat was very short, the damage was plainly visible. Furthermore, as he wore no shirt, the incident was fraught with a still greater inconvenience: for something more than a glimpse of the filthiest pair of drawers was afforded. The Chevalier Kadger had the rent under the arm-pit most cruelly magnified; and his independence of linen, calico, or long-cloth in the shape of shirting, was likewise apparent. As for Count Frumpenhausen—who wore a great loose coat, very much in the shape of a blouse,—its strong coarse material had withstood the violence of the treatment he experienced: but his dirty rag of a handkerchief was hanging for more than three parts of its length out of his pockets. Thus, three more ignominiously comical figures it would be impossible to conceive; and to enhance their mortification, they all in a moment found themselves in the midst of the crowd which had assembled about the Punch and Judy show.

"My eyes, Bill! here's a rum go !" exclaimed a coalheaver to a comrade also wearing a hat with a long flap down the back.

"What a lark !" yelled an urchin with an iron hoop in his hand: and in a moment the three flying Germans were assailed with all sorts of gibes, taunts, and jests.

Away they sped; and away rushed all the small boys of the crowd after them. The ranks of the

pursuers were quickly recruited by other idle urchins in the thoroughfares through which the strange procession passed; and the quicker went the maddened Germans, the quicker likewise became the pace of the crowd that was hooting, yelling, shouting, and laughing at their heels.

In the meanwhile a certain high functionary connected with the British Court—but whose name and precise office it suits our purpose to suppress—was paying a private visit upon particular business to the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha at Mivart's Hotel. His Royal Highness, the illustrious reigning Prince, was clad in a very shabby uniform: but this might be accounted for by the fact that his three trunks, full of magnificent clothing, had gone down to the bottom of the sea: ——at least so the Chevalier Gumbinnen had said; and who would venture to doubt the word of such an eminent personage? His Royal Highness was seated at a table with his hands—and we fear nothing else—in his pockets: while the high functionary of the British Court was seated near the Duke, with a paper containing several *memoranda* before him. A portion of the conversation that was taking place, may not be uninteresting to our readers.

"I am sure your Royal Highness will excuse me," said the Court official, with the most urbane deference of look, tone, and manner: "I am but conveying the sentiments of your august brother——"

"I know it, my lord, I know it," interjected the Grand Duke, who, as the reader will recollect, spoke English tolerably well. "But my brother the Prince must recollect that he is in a very flourishing condition. What would he have been but for his marriage——"

"True, your Royal Highness," said the Court official. "But here"—referring to the paper before him—"we have about six thousand pounds transmitted to your Royal Highness in the course of only eight or nine months. The first thousand——"

"I have already explained to your lordship," answered the Grand Duke, "that it was expended in putting a slate roof upon my palace instead of the wretched old thatch that for years had been rotting there."

"But this second thousand?" said the Court official inquiringly.

"Why, you know, my lord," responded the Grand Duke, "that this sum went for a very delicate purpose—the redemption of my plate—you know what I mean. If I might indulge in a pleasantry, I think it is what you English would call its release from the guardianship of an uncle."

The reigning Grand Duke indulged in a loud "Ha! ha! ha!" And so the Court official—a parasite even to a pauper, so long as this pauper was a Royal one—considered himself compelled to echo it distantly with a tittering "He! he! he!"

"Well, your Royal Highness," he said, "we will not go into any farther details relative to past money-matters: but your august brother the Prince ventures through me to suggest that your Royal Highness might surround yourself with a better class of followers——"

"Indeed!" interrupted the Grand Duke haughtily: "I should advise my august brother to keep such counsel to himself. When he was in Germany, before he contracted his marriage, he was intimate with Gumbinnen — smoked cigars with Kadger—drank beer with Frumpenhausen—and delighted in a dish of sour-crout with Wronki. They are all very good fellows in their way—well-conducted and respectable. They have just gone to a grand entertainment at the young Duke of Marchmont's.—But, Ah! what is this noise?"

"Some street disturbance, no doubt," said the Court official.

The Grand Duke and his visitor hastened to the window; and heavens! what a spectacle met their view! There were those good fellows—those respectable and well-conducted men—rushing like escaped lunatics along the streets, the garments of the two Chevaliers displaying most unseemly rents, and Frumpenhausen's ragged kerchief trailing like a tail behind him. And then came about two hundred urchins and ragamuffins of every description,—yelling, shouting, hooting, and giving vent to their exuberant mirth in terms but little complimentary to the high functionaries belonging to the Court of the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. His Royal Highness was aghast! his lordly visitor was horrified. Into the hotel rushed the three Germans; while half-a-dozen policemen, armed with their bludgeons, darted in amongst the crowd with the intention of dispersing it. This was at length done; and then the Court official, looking significantly at the reigning Duke, said, "Now, your Royal Highness must really pardon me for observing that your followers disgrace you."

"I will have justice, my lord!" exclaimed the Grand Duke, terrifically irate. "I insist that all the persons concerned in this scandalous treatment of my followers, be ordered to leave London within twenty-four hours, and England within three days, on pain of being shut up in the Tower for the rest of their lives."

"Your Royal Highness forgets," answered the Court official, "that this is not Germany."

"Then the sooner it is made like Germany the better!" exclaimed the infuriate Duke. "I am sure my brother is trying hard enough——"

"No doubt, your Royal Highness," rejoined the official; "and we are certainly making progress in that desirable direction. But still things cannot be done in this country on a sudden. We have a Constitution——"

"And what the devil do you want with a Constitution?" exclaimed the Grand Duke. "Do as we do in Germany: keep a Constitution as a sop to throw to the people when irritated—and then take it away again when the public mind has calmed down."

"The plan is certainly a good one, your Royal Highness," answered the lordly sycophant; "but unfortunately, in this country, we have a Parliament—we have laws——"

"Trash! rubbish!" ejaculated the Grand Duke, with a disgust that certainly was most unfeigned. "Get rid of them: do as we do in Germany! ride rough-shod over them! Ah! it is fortunate for you English people that I condescend to visit your shores now and then: for if it were not for the advice I give to my dear brother, I am sure I do not know what would become of you all! And yet he grumbles because I require a little money!"

At this moment the door burst open, and a tall gaunt form strode in, with the spindle-shanks clothed in a strange pair of inexpressibles. This was the Baron Raggidbak; and the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha assumed his haughtiest demeanour on beholding the discharged and disgraced functionary.

"I want my rights!" exclaimed Raggidbak, striking his fist forcibly upon the table up to which he had advanced. "Dey say me get dronk—and me no get dronk! Me only too dam glad to be for seeing anything at Quotha to get dronk upon! Nothing but small beer—dam small beer! Den dey sall say me steal de plate off de harnesa—de plate not worth de stealing! And why for your Royal Highness not pay my wage regular? De Ponch and Judy showman he pay my wage regular: but de Grand Duke he never have not one farden! Dat all de difference! I want my rights——"

"Begone!" exclaimed the Grand Duke: "begone, I say!—or you shall be locked up in a fortress for the remainder of your life."

"Ah! dat all vare goot in Faderland," exclaimed Raggidbak maliciously; "but dat no goot in dis contry! Your Royal Highness sall be for making me one excuse—or how you call it?—one apology; and you sall be for taking me back into your service, mit de pledge dat you sall not be for ill-treating me when we get back to Faderland."

"Now, my good fellow," said the Court official, who had no recollection of Baron Raggidbak, "you had better take yourself off—or I shall call a constable and give you into his custody."

Baron Raggidbak began to curse and swear both in English and in German: he rent his hair—he stamped and stormed—and he vowed that he would expose the characters of all the Grand Duke's officials, as well as their real position and standing in their native land, unless his Royal Highness should consent to do him justice. All these threats he uttered in English—which indeed, apart from the interjected German imprecations, was the language that he had spoken from the outset, for the express behoof of the British Court official whom he found with his Royal Highness. The unfortunate Baron proceeded to create such a tremendous disturbance, that it was deemed necessary to send for a police-officer. He was then most ignominiously given into custody: but it was not thought expedient to convey him into the presence of a magistrate, on account of the threatened revelations. The miserable Baron was therefore dragged to the office of the Home Secretary,—where, after a brief examination, a warrant was made out for his committal to Bethlem, "as a rabid and dangerous lunatic who had dealt in menaces against the august person of the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

A highly coloured account appeared in the daily journals, accompanied by many comments upon "the state of mind of the unfortunate nobleman, who had once filled a distinguished post at the Court of his Royal Highness, but from which he had been dismissed for malversation to the extent of some hundreds of thousands of pounds."

Had those journals been honest, they would have used the word "peculation;" and if they had been truthful, they would have represented the amount of the larceny at the value of about eighteenpence. But their great aim was to impress the public mind with the grandeur, pomp, and riches which prevailed at the Ducal Court of Maxe Stolburg-Quotha.

On the following day the Chevalier Gumbinnen, the Chevalier Kadger, and Count Frumpenhausen appeared each in a bran new suit of clothes, purchased ready-made and privately of Moses and Son; and they received a warning from their ducal master to abstain thenceforth from the habit of eating raw onions, smoking bad cubas, and going without shirts when on a visit to this country—especially to avoid getting into rows—with full permission to relapse into their old ways on their return to their own beloved Fatherland.

CHAPTER CLIV.

THE JUNGLE.

THE scene changes to a far distant country. In a cloudless sky the noon-day sun was set like a huge ball of fire,—its torrid beams pouring down with a sultriness from which it would almost appear that every living thing would shrink to the nearest shade. Not a breath of air fanned the leaves: motionless they hung, as if all artificial, with stems of iron wires. Upon the pools there was not the slightest ruffle: the streams flowed so languidly that they seemed to be of quicksilver—a fluid too heavy to permit the slightest agitation upon the surface. All was likewise silent, as if the scene which we are describing was utterly untenanted by a living thing.

It was one vast wilderness of verdure, broken only by the places where the pools existed or the streams were sluggishly and almost imperceptibly gliding. Masses of underwood were interspersed with trees,—in many spots appearing singly—in others forming small groups—in others again, congregating into the extent of woods—but in the distance so thickly aggregated as to expand into the magnificence of forests. Though the atmosphere was so clear and so fully illuminated with the golden effulgence of the sun, yet was it not merely heavy with its intense sultriness; but in its stagnation there was a sense of noisomeness and disease. To breathe it was fraught with a profound oppressiveness: it seemed impossible that the lungs could become expanded with such inhalation. Breathing itself was gasping: there was no vitality in that air: it afforded not the sense of active vigorous life.

All was silent; and no evidence of the existence of any living thing met the eye of the observer—if an observer there were. And yet how different was the case! Within the dense shade of the underwood wild beasts were lazily reposing, rendered languid almost to torpor by the stifling heat. Within the cup of the wild flower some venomous little reptile was coiled up: the cobra was concealed in the grass: and what seemed to be an uncouthly swollen part of the branch of some tall tree, was in reality the boa-constrictor twisted and twined around into a loathsome slimy knot.

And there *was* an observer amidst that scene. By the side of a pool a man was seated, bathing

his feet, yet half afraid to dip them into the still water for fear lest some monster should thrust up its huge head to seize upon his limbs. Parched with thirst, he drank and drank again; and yet the water refreshed him not; for it was tepid—it was warm to sickliness.

Profoundly unhappy seemed that man; and yet his was a countenance that could scarcely express anything beyond the ferocity and devilish wickedness which belonged to his character. His garments, of an European fashion, were travel-soiled; and as the man sat by that pool, he ever and anon looked around him, as if in utter consternation and dismay when the sense smote him of the stupendous loneliness and utter helplessness of his position.

Presently that dense silence was broken by the sound of something rustling in the brake on the opposite side of the pool; and the object, whatever it were, plunged into the water, which rippled sluggishly, and became still and smooth again. With what awful terror did that man spring up to his feet!—how literally did his hair stand on end!—what intense anguish, what excruciating suspense, what ineffable dread were depicted upon his countenance! An observer—if there had been one—might have forgotten his abhorrent ugliness in the sense of compassion which would have been felt for a being who evidently suffered such dire horror. And no wonder that he should so suffer!—for when that sound broke thus suddenly upon his startled ear, a thousand crucifying apprehensions swept through his brain. Was it a huge serpent about to fling out its hideous length at him and encircle him in its slimy, horrible, deadly folds?—or was it a tiger springing at him?—or was it some other monster belonging to that scene in the midst of which he found himself thus lonely, thus friendless, thus unprotected and forlorn? The scene itself was in India: the place was a jungle;—and that man was the Burker.

He had escaped from Inderabad: but now how bitterly did he curse himself for having taken that step! At least a hundred miles lay betwixt him and the capital of Queen Indora's kingdom: he might possibly retrace his way—he might go back to his fortress: but he dared not; for in order to effect his flight he had slain the sentinel who guarded the passage from which his cell opened; and he could not entertain the hope that Queen Indora or her royal husband would so far overlook the crime as to leave him in possession of his life.

Yet, on the other hand, of what value was that life amidst the horrors of this jungle? He knew not where to place himself in order to be in safety. If he sat beneath the shade of a tree, the hideous idea would creep over him that a huge snake might at any instant dart down with its tremendous length and wind its loathsome coils around him. If he sought the groves, he dreaded lest the silence should suddenly be broken by the howl of a wild beast and its claws should be struck deep into his palpitating flesh. If he made his way through the underwood, he felt every instant as if the deadly cobra were winding around his legs. If he rested himself upon the grass by the side of a stream or pool, his blood still curdled with the apprehension that some insidious reptile was gliding through the rank luxuriance of that herbage towards him. This man lived an entire age of horrors in every passing minute.

At an early hour in the morning of that day he had passed through a little village, where some bullock-drivers, cooking their rice in the public khan, had from charity given him a portion of their food. Thence journeying onward, he had insensibly plunged deeper and deeper into this wild scene of fearful beauty, which, when too late to retreat, he discovered to be a jungle swarming with the brute and reptile enemies of man.

It were vain for the Burker to ask himself what he should do: his imagination could suggest nothing—unless now and then he reflected that it were better to attempt to make his way back to Inderabad, and dare whatever fate might attend him there, than wander about in this abject wretchedness of mind to perish by the venom of a serpent, in the coils of a snake, or by the fangs and claws of a wild beast. And this reflection again occurred to the Burker after that startling incident which had filled him with such horrible apprehension by the side of the stagnant pool.

Yes—his resolve was now taken; and he began to retrace his way, as well as he could recollect it, towards the direction from which he had come. He thought that if he could only regain the village where he had received the alms of rice in the morning, he might thence trace his road back to Inderabad. But pathway in the jungle there was none; and in a very little time the Burker found that he was completely at fault concerning the direction which he ought to pursue. There certainly was a group of trees which he did not remember to have noticed before: there was a pool by which he assuredly had not passed; and there again was the ruin of some ancient temple that seemed to indicate a spot unmarked by him before. Again he sat down in a place which he fancied to be the most secure from any sudden attack on the part of reptile or wild beast; and again did he abandon himself to blank despair. It was a small open spot, denuded of verdure—with underwood at a little distance, and a clump of trees rising in the midst about forty yards off. His eyes were riveted upon those trees, because he now sat motionless, and the gaze of one in such a state of mind is wont to fix itself upon something. Yes—utterly motionless he sat, his elbows upon his knees, his hands supporting his countenance. Slowly through his mind rolled all the incidents of his life—a hideous phantasmagoria—a horrible panorama; and the wretch was appalled by the scenes that memory thus in succession conjured up. What would he give to be enabled to live his entire life over again! And yet it was not precisely remorse—but only regret which the man felt: not remorse for the crimes themselves, but regret that he should have committed them, inasmuch as his present position was one of their consequences. He cursed himself as a fool, rather than loathed himself as a criminal.

His gaze was fixed upon the clump of trees, at first vacantly—until at length something began to attract his attention. It seemed as if one long stem was in motion while the others were stationary. He strained his regards. No—it must be an illusion!—all those stems were utterly still; for how could they possibly be agitated when there was not a breath of air to ruffle the smallest of

the leaves that belonged to their crowning foliage? And yet the Burker felt as if his gaze were irresistibly retained there by some unknown fascination. Ah! again the stem of that tree appeared to move. Yes!—and now the branches themselves were shaken! The next instant all was still. The Burker sat stupified by a vague sense of terror,—his eyes riveted upon that stem. Though the ardent sun was bathing him as it were in its molten effulgence, yet was he now shuddering with a glacial chill; while the big drops burst out cold and clammy upon him. Oh, what a convulsing horror shook him with the strongest spasm as he suddenly beheld that seeming stem draw itself up from the ground and disappear amidst the foliage! Then among the branches and leaves of all those trees there was a rapid rushing—a vivid playing hither and thither—a continuous succession of bounds and leaps and springs, which shook tree after tree;—and the Burker now knew it was the hideous frolicking of a snake amidst that foliage!

He started up to his feet: he endeavoured to move—but overpowering horror riveted him to the spot. His lower limbs seemed turned into stone: they were as heavy as lead—just as they often appear to the dreamer in the midst of a terrific nightmare. Colder and more clammy still stood the perspiration upon him: he was literally bathed in his own agony.

All of a sudden something darted forth from the canopy of verdure: it was the terrible boa constrictor flinging its immense supple length out from amongst the interlacing branches and masses of foliage that had just proved the scene of its fearful gambollings. It was seen by the Burker but for a moment:—it disappeared amongst the underwood; and then there was a rushing noise towards the spot where he stood like an effigy of marble, but with all the keenest sensibility of a man. Yet for not more than another instant did he stand thus as if petrified;—down he fell, as if terror itself had become suddenly personified in some huge giant-shape, and with an invisible foot crushed him to the earth. The wretch writhed upon the soil as if already encircled by the folds of the monstrous snake of which he had caught a glimpse as it flung itself from amidst the trees. Indeed so strong was his imagination that his contortions and convulsions were as agonizing and his throes as horrible as if the serpent had verily and positively got him in its folds. Though all this endured but for a few instants, it was a perfect century of excruciations; and yet no cry escaped his lips—the power of utterance was paralysed—and his agony was perhaps all the greater because he could not give vent to it in one long, loud, pealing cry.

But it was merely in imagination that he was thus suffering. On came the hideous rush that made his blood curdle within him and a glacial chill sweep down his very backbone. But the rush swept past him at a little distance—still amidst the underwood; and then there was a heavy splash in some water that had remained concealed from his eyes. He sprang up to his feet: he rushed away from the spot: but on a little eminence he for a moment reverted his gaze as if by an irresistible fascination. Thence he caught a glimpse of the pool into which the monstrous reptile had plunged; and he beheld its whole length darting through the water, just underneath the surface, and with its head above it. Away sped the Burker:—for a long time he ran, experiencing the awful horror which the spectacle had left upon his mind, as well as the dread that the reptile would yet pursue him and make him its prey.

When thoroughly exhausted—and now with a burning perspiration upon him—he threw himself upon some grass. A loud hissing immediately fell upon his ear; he sprang up as if galvanized; and he caught a glimpse of a cobra gliding away at a little distance. Away he started again; the wretch's brain was almost turned with indescribable horror. At length he beheld what appeared like a rocky elevation, not more than thirty feet high at its greatest altitude; and thither he bent his steps. It proved to be what it appeared; and the Burker found that it contained a cave, without any herbage in its immediate vicinity; so that he walked with a mind relieved from the dread of having his ankle suddenly encircled by some venomous reptile. Yet he was cautious in entering the cave, for fear lest it should be the lair of a wild beast.

It did not penetrate far into the rock; and thus the Burker was soon satisfied that no brute enemy was to be encountered there. There was a sort of loophole fashioned on one side of the cave to admit the light to its innermost depth; and to his mingled joy and surprise he found a mass of cold boiled rice and some fruits placed in a niche underneath the loophole. It naturally struck him that chance had brought him to the habitation of some anchorite-dweller in that jungle; and he sat down in the cave to await the return of its supposed proprietor. But an hour passed—and no one made his appearance. Then the Burker, feeling the pressure of hunger, began to make free with the provisions—to which indeed he was truly welcome; for according to a custom prevalent in India, they had been left by some benevolent Gossoon, or wandering Dervish, for the benefit of the next wayfarer through that wild uninhabited region. But this fact the Burker did not know, and could not then surmise; and thus hour after hour did he wait in the hope of seeing a human form make its appearance; for he craved any companionship in the awful solitude of that jungle.

No one however came; and night was now approaching. There was an ample supply of food for the morrow; for the Burker had eaten sparingly, for fear of giving offence to the supposed anchorite owner of the cavern. The cave was cool during the daytime, in comparison with the intense sultriness that prevailed where he was exposed to the rays of the burning sun; and it seemed to afford a secure resting-place for the night. But haunted by the dread of reptiles and wild beasts, the Burker looked about for the means of rendering it as safe as possible. He blocked up the loophole with stones and fragments of rock: and carrying other fragments into the cave, he formed a barricade sufficiently high at the entrance to protect himself against the intrusion of the enemies he so much dreaded. Then he stretched himself upon the ground to sleep; and thoroughly exhausted, he soon fell into slumber. But his repose was rendered uneasy and agitated by terrific dreams, in which the adventures with the huge

boa-constrictor and the hissing cobra were enacted all over again.

He awoke in the morning, but little refreshed by his slumber—shuddering with the recollections of the dreams that had haunted him—and scarcely able to persuade himself for a considerable time that he was not exposed to some imminent peril of a fearful nature. When his mind was somewhat collected, he removed the barricade from the mouth of the cavern: he walked forth—and he looked around him in the hope of discerning the supposed owner of the place where he had found a lodging. But still no human form met his eye; and returning into the cave he refreshed himself with a portion of the provisions. The fruits cooled his parched tongue; and as he ate, he still marvelled why the supposed owner of the cave should remain absent. At length he began to fancy that he might possibly have died in the jungle, somewhere in the neighbourhood—or that he had become the prey of a wild beast or a reptile. All his horrible apprehensions in respect to those dreaded creatures returned to the Burker's mind; and he ventured not far away from the vicinage of the cave throughout that day. At the back of the rock a spring trickled down; and though unprotected by shade, yet was the water cooler than any which the Burker had tasted elsewhere since his entrance into the jungle. When night came, he barricaded the entrance to the cave again—and he slept: but his slumber was once more haunted by horrible dreams, in which tigers, snakes, and venomous reptiles played a conspicuous part.

When morning returned, the Burker made an end of the provisions which he had found in the cave; and he perceived the necessity of seeking somewhere for a fresh supply, as no living being made his appearance, and he was more than ever convinced that the anchorite-owner of that dwelling must have perished in the jungle. He now wandered farther away from the cavern than on the preceding day he had ventured to do: and he endeavoured to find the route to that village which has been before alluded to. He strove to recollect any particular landmarks that might guide him in his search: but herein he totally failed; and he was floundering farther and farther into the jungle instead of drawing nearer to the accomplishment of his aim. He had however been careful to note the landmarks which might guide him back to the hospitable cavern; and towards evening he began to retrace his way thither, half famished and with something very much like a prospect of starvation before him.

He had to pass an assemblage of trees, constituting a dense grove, and occupying about a couple of acres of ground. As he drew near this grove, the Burker fancied that he heard the sounds of human voices. He stopped and listened. Yes—assuredly his conjecture was right! But who might the individuals be? In a country where the members of the brute creation were of so formidable, fearful, and hideous a nature, some of the human species itself might be dangerous to fall in with. So thought the Burker; and he therefore resolved to proceed with caution before presenting himself to these travellers, whoever they might be. The irregularities of the grove—the trees of which stretched out at one point and retreated inwards at another—favoured his stealthy design: so that the Burker was enabled to find a hiding-place, whence he himself might *reconnoitre* without being seen.

He now beheld two natives, seated upon a spot where only the short grass grew; and the smouldering embers of a fire showed that they had recently been cooking the provisions which they were now eating. These consisted of rice and vegetables: but ever and anon one of the Hindoos took a sort of gourd, which was slung by a leathern belt over his shoulder, and having applied it to his own lips, he passed it to his companion. The latter, instead of a gourd, had a sort of knapsack slung over his own shoulder; and both were men between thirty and forty years of age, attired in a manner that showed they belonged to a humble class. Each however had pistols in his belt; and each a musket, or rifle, lying by his side. They had no horses:—they were evidently travelling upon foot; and they had curiously contrived leathern leggings reaching nearly up to the middle of their thighs—no doubt to protect their lower limbs from the fangs of venomous reptiles while making their way through the jungle. They seemed happy and contented enough, as if reposing in that shade with a perfect sense of security; so that the Burker wondered how they could feel themselves thus safe against the sudden attack of a boa constrictor from a tree, however great their reliance might be on their fire-arms in case of the appearance of a wild beast.

The Burker, encouraged by their evident good-humour, was about to issue forth from his place of concealment and accost the two natives—to whom he intended by signs to make known that he was hungry—when a spectacle which he beheld, retained him still in his hiding-place. It must be understood that this hiding-place was amongst a number of trees jutting forth as it were from the side of the grove itself, and therefore half enclosing the open space where the two natives were reposing and feasting. They themselves were lying in such a way that their backs were towards the grove and their sides towards the Burker. It was just at the very moment when the Burker was about to issue forth and reveal himself, that he beheld some dark object, just within the trees and thick underwood behind the two natives. The next instant the branch of a tree was put aside; and the dark countenance of a man peered forth upon the two travellers. This movement was evidently executed in so stealthy and noiseless a manner that the travellers themselves remained unsuspicious of it: for no doubt if they had heard even so much as the rustling of a leaf, they would have grasped their rifles and started up to their feet. The Burker knew not what it meant: but a vague terror seized upon him—for he fancied that some mischief was intended; and he remained motionless as a statue in his hiding-place. But his eyes were riveted upon the spot where that dark countenance had appeared. Again the branch was put aside in the same noiseless manner as before; and now the Burker beheld two swarthy countenances looking down upon the travellers. He was near enough to observe the sinister glare of the eyes belonging to those two countenances; and a still deeper terror was stricken into his own heart.

If all this had occurred in his own native land, the Burker would have doubtless taken some deci-

sive part: but here, in this horrible jungle, it was quite different. Indeed, his mind was attenuated by the sense of continuous perils which surrounded him—by the objects he had seen—and by his horrible dreams at night: he was in a strange land, where everything was different from what he had been accustomed to in England; and thus was it that the Burker in an Indian jungle was himself a different being from the Burker in his own country.

There he was, motionless in his hiding-place,—his mind full of a dismayed suspense: there were the two travellers, reclining on the grass, unsuspicious of impending evil; and there, in the dense maze of verdure behind them, were the two sinister countenances, with eyes glaring as if upon intended victims. All of a sudden two objects were thrown forth—precisely at the same instant—from amidst those trees; and the next moment the two unfortunate travellers were writhing, convulsing, and seeming by their desperate movements to be battling for their very lives. The Burker comprehended it all! Cords, with nooses at the ends, had been thrown forth from amidst the shade of the trees. With such unerring skilfulness and terrible precision were these lassos used that the nooses had fallen round the necks of the two travellers; while the murderers amongst the trees were drawing the cords tight, so that the wretched victims were already in the agonies of death.

Accustomed though the Burker was to deeds of crime, not only in respect to their contemplation, but also their perpetration, he was nevertheless astounded, horrified, and appalled at this spectacle. Even if he had wished to move, he had not the power: his limbs were paralysed—his blood had all curdled in his veins. He could no longer see the murderers within the grove: but he had a frightful view of their victims, who were writhing in the agonies of death and vainly grasp-

ing at the cords which were tight round their throats. At length their mortal sufferings were put an end to; and there they lay, still and dead—those who had so lately been in the enjoyment of vigorous life, exchanging convivial words, and with smiles upon their lips! The Burker felt as if a noose were round his own neck; and he dared scarcely even breathe, for fear lest he should betray his presence there and become the third victim!

The two assassins now emerged from their ambush. They were tall, athletic, well-made individuals—nearly naked—each with but a scanty garment of dark cloth fastened round the middle of the body. Their eyes had a ferocious glare, like those of wild beasts; and when they grinned at each other, with fierce bloodthirsty satisfaction at the contemplation of the work they had performed, the Burker perceived that their teeth had been filed into points, so that they resembled those of a shark, or the sharp jagged edge of a saw. Altogether there was something unnatural and fiend-like in the appearance of those miscreants: for though they had the human shape, it was scarcely possible to fancy that they were veritable human beings. The Burker trembled for his life: his breath was held with horrible suspense: his blood seemed to turn into ice in his veins.

Most of our readers will have comprehended that the two assassins belonged to the horrible sect of Thugs, or Stranglers, which has not altogether disappeared from the peninsula of Hindostan. The Burker did not however know who they were; nor had he the slightest idea that their murderous pursuits constituted a sort of diabolic creed as well as a regular avocation. He took them to be mere banditti, who on this occasion had availed themselves of the readiest means of taking the lives of their victims whom they did not dare provoke to an open combat on account of the firearms they possessed.

The Stranglers—having gratified their horrible propensity for murderous deeds by gazing for a few minutes upon their victims—proceeded to take possession of their weapons; and then unfastening the cords from around the necks of the murdered men, the Thugs plunged again into the recesses of the grove. They did not tarry to rifle the persons of their victims: they did not even so much as open the knapsack which was slung over the shoulder of one of them: nor did they touch the liquor which the gourd contained, nor the remainder of the food which had been left upon the grass. They vanished from the Burker's view, bearing with them their fatal lassos, and all the weapons that had belonged to the victims of this hideous assassination.

For nearly half-an-hour, however, did the Burker remain in his hiding-place after the departure of the Stranglers. He was afraid to move. He now thought much less of snakes, reptiles, and tigers, than of those horrible miscreants whose victims lay stretched motionless before his eyes. At length the Burker began to take courage somewhat; and thinking that the coast must now be completely clear, he stole forth from his hiding-place. It was still however with fear and trembling that he approached the corpses: for by so doing he approached likewise that very part of the grove where the lassos had been thrown forth. The murderers might still be there; and one of those fatal cords might be thrown out for its deadly noose to encircle his own neck as he had seen both circle the necks of the dead towards whom he was now cautiously and timidly advancing! But all was still; and the Burker, gaining more and more courage, proceeded to possess himself of the gourd, the knapsack, and the remnant of provisions. He longed to tarry and rifle the persons of the dead; for if he found money upon them it might be serviceable to him if ever he should succeed in getting out of that jungle: but a sudden rustling amongst the trees made him flee away for his very life. He was at a considerable distance before he dared to look back; and then he beheld not the forms of the miscreants whom he so much dreaded that his eyes would encounter.

He succeeded in gaining his cavern: but there was another source of surprise and mystification for him. A fire had evidently been lighted in front of the cave during the day; another mass of boiled rice and a quantity of fruits were left in the niche underneath the loophole. But no human being was to be seen on that spot except the Burker himself. The man was seized with a sort of vague and awful terror, as if with the sense that he was the object of some design on the part of preternatural powers. Perhaps the Enemy of Mankind himself was placing that food in his way, more effectually to seal his doom than his own antecedent crimes could have done? But this was an impression that could not be permanently made on such a mind as the Burker's; and he began to have an inkling of the real truth. Doubtless that cavern served as a temporary halting-place for wayfarers through the dreadful jungle? — and doubtless likewise the food was left by some well-provided person for the use of any less fortunate individual who might be compelled to trust entirely to such thoughtful charity? These were the ideas that now arose in the Burker's mind; and the reader is already aware how consistent they happened to be with the actual truth.

He was now well supplied with provisions for the next two or three days; and he found that the gourd contained some exceedingly potent spirit. He ate and drank heartily; but his soul was the prey to a continuous trouble—for he dreaded lest chance or previous knowledge should bring the shark-teethed murderers to his cave. On examining the knapsack, he found that it contained a quantity of despatches, written in a manner which he could not possibly comprehend; and he therefore concluded that the victims of the Stranglers must have been messengers bearing some documents from one Indian authority to another.

When the darkness set in, the Burker barricaded the place with even greater precautions than those he had previously adopted. He slept but little that night; and when slumber did fall upon his eyes, it was more than ever feverish and uneasy; for not merely were his dreams now haunted by wild beasts and reptiles, but likewise by the images of human beings as terrible as the tiger and as stealthy as the serpent.

CHAPTER CLV.

THE TIGER.

On awaking in the morning, the Burker seriously reflected upon his position; and he came to the fixed resolve of escaping out of that jungle, or perishing in the attempt. Being thus determined to abandon the hospitable cave, the Burker filled the knapsack with the remnant of his provisions and slung it over his shoulders. He likewise took with him the gourd; for it still contained no inconsiderable quantity of spirits, which being of a very potent character, produced much effect with even the smallest dram.

It cost the Burker some regret to leave the cavern that had sheltered him; for he felt like a man who was leaving a harbour of comparative safety to enter upon the terrific perils of unknown seas. Perhaps, indeed, the miscreant would have remained altogether in that place, trusting to the benevolence of wayfarers to continue their supplies of provision; but after the tragedy which he had beholden in the jungle, he could not linger in a neighbourhood which appeared to be infested with human monsters as formidable as those which belonged to the brute creation. The Burker accordingly set out, with his gourd and his knapsack, to enter upon the stupendous task of finding an issue from the jungle. Let the reader conceive how great would have been the danger and the consternation of those mariners of the olden time who were the first to penetrate into the awful watery solitudes of the South Pacific, if their compass had been lost. But almost equally hopeless was the task now entered upon by this man—exposed to a thousand perils—without fire-arms or weapons of any kind to protect himself against the wild animals that swarmed in the solitudes of that jungle—ignorant of the way he ought to pursue—and going forth to trust entirely to hazard and to accident to guide him out of this dread inhospitable region.

Not far had the Burker proceeded, when at a distance of about a hundred yards ahead he perceived a tall object, which he had at first taken for a tree, or shrub, suddenly put itself in motion. What at the outset he had fancied to be the branches, all in an instant expanded and seemed to be flapping violently. The idea that it could be a bird flashed through the Burker's mind: but a bird of at least seven feet in height appeared to him an impossibility. Yet a second thought made him reflect that a country which could produce snakes so monstrous as those which he had seen, might contain amongst its zoological wonders birds as colossal as the object which he now beheld at a little distance. He stood still, less terrified perhaps than he had been at the sight of other living things the very names of which made the blood run cold and the flesh creep upon the bones: but still he was far from feeling comfortable.

It was indeed a bird which the man was contemplating; and it was now walking slowly away from the spot where he first saw it. We may as well inform the reader that it was one of the adjutant species, which often attains the height of five feet, and sometimes grows to the proportions of this specimen which the Burker was now surveying. Slowly it proceeded, until appearing suddenly to catch sight of a form to which the eye was unaccustomed, it advanced towards the Burker. Now the man was seized with a complete terror: he turned and fled. But the giant adjutant bird was speedily in his close vicinage; and, apprehending a sudden attack, he snatched up a large stone against which his foot kicked. Fortunate for him was it that he stepped back at the same moment with the speed of lightning: for from the very spot whence he had picked up the stone, a cobra di capello darted forth, raising its hideous hooded head, hissing, and preparing to spring at him. In another moment the adjutant bird seized the cobra in its bill; and the Burker availed himself of the circumstance to place a still greater interval between himself and that colossal specimen of the feathered tribe. He looked back:—the reptile had disappeared from the bill of the bird; and the bird itself was slowly walking away in a contrary direction to that which the Burker was pursuing.

Relieved from that source of apprehension, the wanderer continued his path—if path it could be called where beaten road there was none, and where he advanced amidst thick underwood or rank grass—or else over patches of sward where the herbage was short and sweet, constituting the few oases of wholesome vegetation in that wilderness. For a couple of hours the Burker proceeded without experiencing any fresh peril or alarm—until all of a sudden he was startled by a terrific crashing amongst a neighbouring thicket; and thence emerged a huge animal, which by the trunk and the long ivory tusks he knew to be an elephant. The brute seemed to be either in a naturally wild or else frightened state: for on emerging from the brake, it stood snorting, elevating its trunk, and pawing, or rather trampling the ground with its feet. The Burker stood transfixed with terror for a few moments: he was then about to turn and fly, when there was a sudden rush from the same thicket—and another animal made its appearance. The next moment the elephant and this new-comer closed as it were in combat; and still was the Burker transfixed, gazing upon the awful scene.

The brute with which the elephant was thus engaged, was of considerably less dimensions; and it had a long curving tusk, or horn, on the upper part of its snout. The wanderer in the jungle knew not what it was: but the reader has by this time comprehended that it was a rhinoceros—the deadly foe of the elephant. Each seemed to be fully aware of the mode of attack that would be adopted by the other. The elephant rushed at the rhinoceros to pierce it with its long tusks: but the rhinoceros, though apparently so unwieldy, wheeled about, escaped the meditated blow, and then rushed in with the intention of ripping its opponent's belly with its own tusk. Then the elephant itself displayed a similar agility; and with a sudden movement received the blow upon its haunch, where its impenetrable skin was an effective armour of resistance. Then front to front they were again:—this time the elephant's sharp-pointed tusks pierced the side of the rhinoceros, near the shoulder; and the next moment the horn of the wounded brute was driven up with all the force of the impulsive head into the belly of the elephant. Down fell the

huge animal, a strange and terrific sound denoting its mortal agony; while the victorious rhinoceros, drawing back for an instant, rushed forward and inflicted another hideous ripping wound.

The Burker meanwhile had been gazing with indescribable feelings of mingled awe and horror: but he now tarried to behold no more; for he dreaded lest the conquering brute should seek him as another victim. He plunged farther and farther into the jungle—his brain dizzy with the idea of all the horrors that surrounded him, and lost in an appalling wonderment as to what new spectacle might suddenly burst upon his view. He drew near a forest which stretched far as the eye could reach upon his right hand; and if he had been skilled in the vegetable history of Hindostan, he would have known that it was an immense assemblage of those superb teak-trees which rival the British oak in the building of ships. Avoiding the forest as much as possible, on account of the double perils of boa constrictors and Stranglers, the Burker turned away to the left; and another hour's journey brought him to a new scene of verdure. Here towering palm-trees were laden with their fruit—that fruit which he could not reach: but he beheld countless monkeys running up the stems and playing amongst the branches. Mangoes were there growing in wild abundance: but the Burker dared not eat of them, for he was afraid of being poisoned. Pepper-vines and cardamom-plants were richly interspersed around: the plantain and the jack were likewise flourishing there.

The beams of the vertical sun were now fraught with so intense a sultriness that the Burker would have given worlds to be enabled to seek some grateful shade: but for the reasons above set forth, he dared not. He was athirst; for since he had left his cavern he had found no pool nor stream with whose waters he might moisten his feverish lips. He dragged himself painfully along: but in another half-hour he reached a broad stream. Here he sat down to slake his thirst and bathe his feet: but scarcely had he taken off his shoes, when a long terrific head was thrust up above the surface of the water at a little distance; and the gaping jaws showed frightful ranges of teeth. With a cry—a perfect yell of agony, which resounded through those wilds—the Burker started up to his feet, snatched up his shoes, and darted away. On glancing back, he beheld a tremendous alligator emerge from the river; and more quickly sped the affrighted wretch, his mind suffering excruciations as terrific as if he were actually in the jaws of the stupendous reptile. But when he again looked round, he perceived that he was safe from pursuit; and he sank exhausted and in despair upon some masses of granite rock. Tears coursed their way down the face of the unhappy man. He who had never known what compunction was when about to perpetrate a crime—he who had even done murder's work without remorse—now wept at the fearful position in which he found himself. Whichever way he turned, spectacles of horror or of danger—indeed, of both combined—presented themselves. The grass under his feet—the trees above his head—the brakes on one hand—the thickets on the other—the very streams with whose waters he sought to slake his thirst, were all teeming with living beings threatening him with a horrible death. Little had the miscreant ever thought of a future state or of punishments in a world to come: but now it seemed to him as if there were veritably a hell upon earth, affording a frightful foretaste of the one that was to be experienced hereafter!

The Burker put on his shoes; and wiping away the tears which had flowed down his cheeks, he applied himself to the contents of the gourd in order to acquire the reckless courage of desperation. He now looked about him to ascertain the nature of the spot where he had sunk down exhausted. We have already said that he had thrown himself upon some granite blocks; and a closer inspection showed him that they belonged to the ruins of an edifice. These ruins occupied about a quarter of an acre; and the wanderer walked slowly around them. Whatever the edifice might have been, it had almost completely yielded to the effects of time or else to some convulsion of nature; for it had fallen into a destruction that well nigh rendered it a heap of shapeless, meaningless ruins. But presently the Burker discovered the remnant of a gateway, the upright pillars of which still remained. He looked in; and the burning beams of the vertical sun fell fully upon a figure of hideous appearance and colossal dimensions, which appeared to be seated upon an elevation such as a throne or an altar. Despite the potent alchohol which he had imbibed from the gourd, the wanderer's mind was still so attenuated as to be keenly susceptible of the most startling impressions; and his first idea was that a country which teemed with such monsters of the brute creation, might likewise possess human beings of a giant shape. But it was only an effigy of black marble on which the Burker was gazing—a Hindoo deity that had survived, so to speak, the ruin of the temple which enshrined it. The Burker soon saw that it was only an image: he gathered courage—and he penetrated a little way farther, taking a position where the overhanging masses of a once shapely masonry protected him from the beams of the sun. There he sat down; and opening his knapsack, partook of his provisions. Another application to the gourd strengthened his mind in the sense of a reckless desperation: and presently sleep stole upon his eyes.

For about a couple of hours the wearied wanderer thus slept; and as he slowly awoke, it was to encounter the aspect of the colossal effigy of black marble. For a few moments he gazed with an appalled consternation: for during the interval of slumber he had forgotten where he was and what object he had last seen. By degrees however the recollection came back to his mind; and it was also by degrees that he grew aware of some life-like motion on the surface of the black marble effigy. He looked with increasing horror in his gaze and in his mind; and his hair stood on end as he gradually comprehended the hideous truth. Numerous snakes, of small dimensions, were creeping over the Hindoo deity,—some twining around its brow—others dragging their slimy folds over its face—some twisting around its arms—some winding about its legs—others hissing as they trailed their lengths upon its body. The Burker discerned likewise that these reptiles were hooded like the cobra, though they were of a different colour. They were indeed the manilla snakes—

endowed with a venom as deadly as the cobras themselves; but instead of lurking in the grass, they delighted in infesting old buildings and dragging their slimy coils over granite or marble. There was something appallingly horrible in the spectacle of those serpents thus playing about the motionless image; and the Burker, so soon as he could in any way recover from the consternation into which the sight had thrown him, rushed forth from amidst the ruins of that temple. His ears as he thus beat a precipitate retreat were saluted with such a commingling of horrible hissings, that he fancied the whole reptile population of the temple must be swarming out in pursuit of him: so that again did his blood curdle in his veins—again did an ice-chill appear to smite his heart—and again did the very flesh creep upon his bones.

Bitterly did he now repent having left his cavern. Better—far better were it for him to have remained there, even though it were to encounter the peril of the Stranglers' deadly noose, than to wander thus forth amidst scenes where if he only lay down to rest, it was in the midst of a swarm of venomous reptiles. No thought had the wretch of thanking heaven for having preserved him from the hideous danger which for two hours he had unconsciously incurred: but he gave vent to terrific imprecations against his folly for having quitted the cave. To return thither was impossible: he had not studied to preserve the recollection of any landmarks to guide him back to it; and he could no more from memory retrace his way than he could spontaneously discover an issue from the jungle.

Yet where was he to sleep at night? Not upon the grass—not under a tree—not up in the branches of a tree itself—not by the side of a river—not amidst any ruins on which he might stumble! There was death everywhere in that frightful place!—death looked out upon him from every thicket—from every tree—from every brake—from every stone. Surely, surely it was hell upon earth? To die by his own hand? Yes!—but how? He had no weapon. Ah! strangulation? He might suspend himself to a tree? No!—for he dared not even approach a tree for that purpose. The wretch must live: he felt that he must live on until he should become a prey to the tiger, the snake, or the venomous serpent!

He pursued his way, dragging himself slowly along—his only hope being that the jungle must have an end somewhere or another, and that possibly—yes, by the *barest* possibility—he might escape the myriad perils of that wilderness and find himself safe at last. Oh, what a faint hope!—and yet it was the only one to which the wretch could possibly cling. He endeavoured to sustain himself therewith as he pursued his way: but his progress was exceedingly slow; for even when evening approached, the heat continued to be most oppressive.

The sun was setting when the Burker reached a large barren space of two or three acres in extent, and which presented the singular aspect of a perfect desert in the midst of all the surrounding wild, rank, and luxuriant verdure. How this utter desolation on that spot could possibly be, the man suspected not: but it no doubt arose from some volcanic action, which geologists could satisfactorily explain. Here the Burker resolved to lie down and rest himself for the night: for though he could scarcely deem himself secure from roaming wild beasts, yet he at least fancied he was safe against the insidious attacks of reptiles;—and surrounded by so many frightful perils as he was, it naturally appeared a consolation to have even a portion of them for the time mitigated or set at rest.

The dusk closed in around him—or rather, we should say, as much of dusk as there was in that clime and at that season of the year; and the Burker slept. How long he had slumbered he knew not: but he was awakened by the most frightful din. The whole jungle seemed alive with horrible noises,—the howls, the cries, and the yells of wild beasts all mingling in one appalling and stupendous chorus. The wretched man started up with his hair standing on end, his frame quivering violently, and his heart palpitating with such force that it seemed as if it must burst. He listened in awful consternation: he could catch the sounds of objects rushing amongst the underwood and the long rank grass which bounded the desert place that he had chosen for his home during the night. It seemed as if death in some frightful shape must every minute overtake him; and imagination can conceive nothing more horrible than the din by which he was environed. For all the living things in that jungle to be thus disporting, gambolling, quarrelling, or fighting, was something more than the human brain could endure. He felt as if he were going mad: a terrible bewilderment seized upon him—he rushed hither and thither—until at length he sank down completely exhausted, and his senses abandoned him.

When he came back to consciousness, the sun was rising above the distant trees: the jungle was all completely quiet once more. The heat soon became so intense that it appeared to extinguish every trace of life, save that of the Burker's only. But even the smallest insects which had swarmed during the night, had now vanished; and the atmosphere seemed dead with its heavy, immoveable, torrid oppressiveness. The Burker shuddered with horror as he thought of the terrific din which had startled him up in the middle of the night; and he wondered that he had not fallen a victim to the wild beasts which had raged or frolicked during the hours of the sun's absence. To pass such another night as that, in the midst of the jungle, seemed an absolute impossibility; and the Burker asked himself in literal anguish of mind whether it were possible to find an issue from the wilderness during the many long hours of daytime that were now before him? He partook of his food; he drank of the contents of the gourd; and he resumed his way.

The desert spot was left behind: he was once again floundering through the jungle. In about an hour he reached a forest, composed entirely of bamboos growing to a considerable height. Nothing could surpass the picturesque magnificence of that scene: but the Burker scarcely comprehended it:—heaven knows he was in no humour to contemplate whatsoever beauties nature might present to the view in the midst of that wilderness. Taking care not to approach too near to the trees of that forest, he pursued his way amidst the long grass,—until all in a moment he was startled by a savage growl; and looking around with an agonizing sense of horror, he be-

held an immense tiger at a little distance. There was a tree near. Forgotten all in a moment was the possibility that a boa constrictor might be coiled amongst its branches; and for his life did the Burker rush to that tree. If in cool deliberate moments he had attempted to climb up the trunk, his progress would have doubtless been laboured and slow: but now it was with the veritable agility of a monkey that with arms and legs deftly moving, the aim was accomplished. The tiger bounded to the foot of the tree just as the Burker succeeded in grasping the lowest branches; and the animal gave another terrific howl as it found that its intended victim had escaped. High up towards the Burker the tiger leaped: the frightened man drew himself as it were into the narrowest possible compass: at the same moment there was a rustling amongst the leaves of the branches projecting from the opposite side of the tree—and down was flung the hideous length of an immense snake, its coils being wound about the tiger's body with lightning rapidity.

So horrified was the Burker at this spectacle, that his hands relaxed their hold upon the branches; and he nearly fell,—when he clutched them convulsively again. As a man looks down with consternation and with a cold creeping feeling of the flesh into the depth of a tremendous gulf—so looked down the Burker from amidst the foliage of the tree, at the scene that was taking place below. The coils of the immense snake had been flung around the tiger just at the very moment it was springing upward in the hope of reaching the Burker; and thus the reptile's deadly folds had circled the fore-legs of the animal, pinioning them as it were to its neck. The tiger fell down; and by means of his hind legs, as well as with the convulsing litheness and elasticity of its body, it plunged, and writhed, and made the most desperate efforts to escape from its fearful enemy. But all in vain! The boa constrictor had its tail coiled tight round the branch from which it had thrown itself; and not more securely is a ship kept at anchor by its cable, than that tiger was held fast by the supple length of the snake.

At first terrific howls and cries of anguish burst from the tiger's mouth: but these soon ceased; for the constricting folds circled its neck as well as all the fore-part of its body; and those folds were tightened with all their terrific power, until the captured brute was compelled to desist from its howlings by the sense of strangulation. The snake seemed to have done enough for the present: or else, with a hideous malignity, it purposed to play with its victim ere completely despatching it: or else perhaps, conscious how completely the tiger lay in its power, it wished to ascertain to what extent the brute's efforts might go to release itself from the binding coils. At all events the snake remained quiet, when the tiger, exhausted by its ineffectual endeavours to escape from the folds, lay motionless as if dead.

The Burker had desperately clutched the branches in order to retain himself in the tree; and looking down, he observed all that we have been describing. He could see the head of the reptile lying flat upon the tiger's back, close by the side of its own last slimy fold; and the eyes—small—shining like diamonds, but with a dread sinister light—seemed to be looking up at the man in the tree. Cold and horrible was the shudder which swept through the Burker's form, as he wondered within himself why the snake had not attacked him in preference to the tiger? He knew not that the instinct of the reptile taught it to prefer that which was its natural and known enemy, rather than assail a form which it was but little accustomed to behold in the jungle,—a human form the like of which perhaps the reptile had never seen before. Indeed, if the Burker had been better instructed in the habits of that species of snake, he would have known that he might now in all safety descend from the tree and continue his way: for that the reptile and the tiger would never separate until one should have become the victim of the other. But all this the Burker knew not; and consequently he dared not think of effecting his escape. Indeed, he fancied that if he were to descend from the tree, the serpent might suddenly loosen its hold upon the tiger to fling its deadly coils around himself—and that thus he should become exposed to the attack of both the snake and the wild beast.

But to be doomed to remain in that tree, and witness the spectacle that was passing underneath, was an idea so horrible that the man's brain reeled—a species of vertigo seized upon him—and again was he about to fall from the tree, when he was startled by a sudden howl of mingled rage and anguish that burst from the mouth of the tiger. Oh, with what tenacity did the Burker again clutch the branches of that tree!—how fearful was the shuddering that swept through his entire frame!—how excruciating was the sense of his hideous position!

It was but one howl which the tiger thus sent forth at that moment: for the coils which the snake had probably loosened in malignant sport for an instant, were suddenly drawn tight again. The brute was half strangled once more: but it made the mightiest and most desperate efforts to release itself from the deadly coils. It lashed the grass and ground with its tail—and therewith likewise it dealt terrific blows at the snake itself. It tried to tear the reptile with its hinder claws: it convulsed—it writhed—it rolled itself about: its agony was horrible. Then the snake tightened its coils, just sufficiently to overpower its victim without actually extinguishing its life; and there was another dread interval of silence. Tight round the branch of a tree remained the tail of the snake; its long supple body hung down like an immense rope, gradually becoming thicker and thicker until it attained the dimensions of the Burker's thigh; and then each successive coil became less and less in circumference, to the thin tapering neck on which the comparatively small head was fixed. During this second interval of silence—this period of suspended death-struggles on the part of the tiger—the reptile's eyes again appeared to be looking up towards the Burker with a gleaming, vibrating light. He endeavoured to avert his own gaze; but he found it irresistibly bent down again upon those small dark brown reptile orbs that were twinkling as diamonds.

Again, all of a sudden, was there a desperate effort made by the tiger to release itself. With all the power of its hind legs, and of its form which was well nigh as supple as that of the snake

itself, did it strive to drag the reptile down from the tree. The boa constrictor seemed to elongate like a tightened cable when a ship is pulling hard at its moorings: but in a few moments the wondrous elasticity of the serpent was displayed; for, apparently without an effort, it shortened its length, as it were, and drew the tiger completely in towards the root of the tree. Then, the Burker, with hair standing on end, and the flesh creeping coldly, heard the crashing of the bones of the agonizing wild beast: for the coils of the snake were giving the last fatal evidence of their constricting power. Slowly advanced the snake's head, farther and farther over the body of the tiger: tighter and tighter became the coils: more continuous, but likewise more and more languid, grew the convulsions and the writhings of the perishing wild beast. At length the tiger lay motionless—but not this time to recover from its exhaustion and gather strength for a new effort to shake off its enemy. The tiger was dead.

Again there was an interval of silence; and the Burker might have fancied that the snake was dead likewise, were it not that its eyes continued to gleam with that horrible reptile light, and that its length between the branch sustaining its tail and the commencement of its coils around the tiger, dangled lazily to and fro, like a partially loosened cable agitated by the wind. But not long was this interval of silence: for soon did the bones again begin to crash; and now all along the supple length of the serpent there were the evidences of the strong muscular motion, the vibrations and the tensions, by which the constricting process was carried on against the last impediments. The tiger lay with its mouth open, its tongue lolling out and dabbled with blood. Its green eyes were fixed in a glassy stare; and the constricting power of the reptile gave a continuous oscillating motion to the form of the wild beast itself. Gradually the snake wound its coils completely about the tiger, which thus kept on elongating in the powerful gripe of each iron fold. The boa proceeded deliberately with the work that it was accomplishing: it had to break the bones in every part of the brute's body; and thus at length its neck encircling the hinder legs, drew them tight up against the belly of the wild beast. Ribs, legs, backbone all were thus successively crushed; so that at the expiration of a time the tiger presented to the view only one long shapeless mass. Ever and anon the snake desisted for awhile, as if to rest—or as if to gloat over its triumph and its intended meal. And all this while the Burker remained in the tree, a spectator of the hideous scene!

Two mortal hours thus passed from the moment when the snake first flung its coils about the form of the tiger, until the point which our description has just reached. Two mortal hours!—they seemed two centuries to the miserable man! Nothing could be more horrible than the sensation produced upon him by the breaking, crashing, and crushing of those bones. He felt as if the snake were coiled around himself, and as if they were his own bones which were thus frightfully yielding to the infernal pressure. Indeed, the world has no language possessing terms strong enough to convey an idea of all the wretch experienced during those two mortal hours. Nothing he had previously known of the horrors of the jungle, could be compared to this crowning one. His compulsory vicinage to that monstrous reptile, measuring at least forty feet in length, was in itself a stupendous horror: but when he heard the bones crash—and ignorant of the precise habits of the snake, trembled lest it should seek *another* victim—he felt as if he were about to yell forth in the wild anguish of a maniac.

But the reptile had other work to do. Gradually loosening its coils from around the tiger, it began to cover the elongated carcase with a slime which its livid jaws poured forth,—its lambent tongue playing the while, and its eyes gleaming in a manner that added fresh details to the unspeakable hideousness of the entire scene. At the same time a most sickly and revolting effluvium began to circle about the Burker, as he sat up in the tree. It grew more and more intense: the whole atmosphere around him seemed poisoned. He thought that the strongest life could not remain proof against that disgusting odour: again did a species of vertigo seize upon him; and again did he clutch the branches with all his power in order to save himself from falling.

Aroused by that effort, more mechanical than voluntary at the time,—he again looked down to behold the doings of the snake. It was preparing to enjoy the fruits of its triumph—to banquet after its own fashion upon its victim—to partake of its horrid meal. The Burker could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses when he perceived that the snake was preparing to swallow the lubricated and elongated carcase of the tiger. The reptile's head was of a smallness and its neck of a narrowness in comparison with the bulk of its body at the thickest part, that it seemed impossible for even an object a quarter as great as the dead wild beast to be swallowed in such a manner. How great therefore was the Burker's amazement—how breathless his horror—how fearful the interest which he experienced, when he perceived the jaws of the snake open to an extent which readily allowed them to suck in as it were the head of the tiger. With its tail still retaining a firm hold of the branch of the tree, as if on this support depended the entire muscular power which the reptile possessed,—it proceeded slowly—and it even appeared, painfully—to suck in the remainder. This appalling process lasted for nearly half-an-hour: then slowly did the boa disengage its tail from the branch; and as much of its length as had remained suspended to the tree, dropped heavily to the ground. The snake now lay completely still: its head was buried somewhere amidst its coils—so that the vibrating eyes were no longer looking up at the Burker. He could perceive where, in the thickest part of its body, the mass of the swallowed tiger lay: for there was a tremendous bulging-out of the reptile's form, defining the complete configuration of that degluted mass.

For nearly four hours had the Burker now remained in the tree; and he began to recollect something he had once heard or read of the torpid state in which reptiles remain for a long while after having partaken of a meal. Still he dared not immediately descend from the tree—though stronger and stronger grew his belief and his hope that the serpent was now powerless to hurt him.

The effluvium continued most poisonous—most sickly: for it mingled with the heavy sultry air, which was itself stagnant and dead; and there was not the slightest breath of a healthful breeze to carry that odour away. Time was passing: the snake lay completely motionless; and at length the Burker ventured to agitate the branches. This experiment strengthened his belief and his hope: for not even so much as the reptile's head was raised from amidst the folds into which the boa had gathered itself at the foot of the tree. There it lay like a hideous shapeless mass—inert—to every appearance deprived of vitality.

Summoning all his courage to his aid, the Burker descended from the tree. A dread convulsing shudder shook him coldly as his feet touched the ground—a shudder produced by the hideous apprehension that the snake might dart at him. But no!—it still lay motionless. Then away he sped—away he sped as if for his very life!—and he breathed not freely, until a considerable distance being completed, he looked back and saw that he was safe from all pursuit. Yet still he rushed on, anxious to place as long an interval as possible betwixt himself and the scene of the horrible spectacle which he had beholden. At length, thoroughly exhausted, he sank upon a sward of short sweet herbage, near the brink of a well, the mouth of which was surrounded by granite blocks to a height sufficient to prevent any one from falling in if walking incautiously in the day-time or journeying that way in the dark.

Yes—the Burker was utterly exhausted, both in mind and body. He wondered how he had possibly survived the tremendous spectacle he had witnessed. It even appeared to him a dream—though it was indeed all a terrific reality. For a while he forgot the cravings of hunger; he thought not even of strengthening himself with the contents of his gourd: it seemed as if he could not sufficiently reason his mind into the conviction that he had actually escaped with his life from the hideous perils which he had so recently encountered. But at length he addressed himself to his provisions; and he was exhilarated with the potent fluid which he imbibed from the friendly gourd.

CHAPTER CLVI.

THE STRANGLER

The Burker was seated upon the grass, partaking of the rice and fruits which his knapsack contained, as well as of the alcoholic beverage from the gourd,—when, in his endeavour to put away from his thoughts the late hideous scene of which he had been a beholder, he began to reflect on the tragedy in which the shark-teethed Stranglers had played so direful a part. He recalled to mind the insidious manner in which they had from the maze of verdure first ascertained the precise position in which their victims were reclining ere they threw out their deadly lassos. The Burker reflected how much it behoved him to be continuously on his guard against such stealthy, creeping, cat-like miscreants; and he began revolving in his mind what he should do if circumstances happened to make him aware that such monsters in human shape were at any time menacing himself with danger. Anxious to divert his thoughts from the more recent incident of horror, he kept them steadfastly fixed on this other topic; and he weighed a dozen different plans of dealing with the Stranglers should he happen to fall in with them. But chiefly he perceived the necessity of keeping entirely on his guard, and not for an instant losing his presence of mind if the emergency should arise.

It was while thus meditating that he beheld something which put all his resolution to the test. We should remark that amongst the various remains of a superior civilization which formerly characterized that Hindoo population whom British misrule and tyranny have thrown back and degraded, there are numerous tanks and wells in different parts of the Indian Peninsula. These are sometimes to be found in the jungles themselves; for where those jungles now serve as dwelling-places for reptiles and wild beasts, a consummate agriculture once flourished. It was by one of these wells that the Burker had seated himself; and, as we have already stated, the mouth was surrounded by large blocks of stone, forming a circular wall to the height of about two feet and a half. This wall was overgrown with bushes and long grass, constituting as it were a brake or thicket that nearly covered the entrance of the well, whose diameter was upwards of four feet. All in a moment—just as the Burker was looking towards the well, wondering how deep it could be, and whether he could by any possible means obtain some water thence to cool the lips and tongue that were parched by the alcohol as well as by the intense sultriness of the sun—he distinctly caught sight of a human eye gleaming at him betwixt an opening in the stones and through the thicket. A shudder swept over him: but it was imperceptible; and inasmuch as he had only an instant before made up his mind how to act in case of a particular emergency arising, he was not thrown off his guard. Fortunate for him was it that the very subject which now exacted all his self-possession should have so recently occupied his thoughts. In a word, he was fully prepared for that which now occurred.

He did not appear to take any notice of the circumstance itself: but laying himself flat down on the grass, he shaded his eyes with his hand as if to keep off the beams of the sun. He was nevertheless gazing sideways in the direction of the spot where he had seen the human eye: for that it *was* a man's eye he felt convinced; and equally certain was he that it belonged to one of the murderers of the two travellers, or else to some one who pursued similar avocations. He reflected what course he should pursue. He had the horrible conviction that if he were to rise up and attempt to seek safety in flight, the deadly lasso would in a moment be round his neck. It was to avoid this peril that he had thrown himself flat upon his back. He failed not to remember that the Stranglers had taken possession of the fire-arms of their recent victims: but he thought to himself that if the individual concealed in the well were really one of those Stranglers—if he still retained the fire-arms—and if he had purposed to use such a weapon on the present occasion, he would not have waited all this while; for it was so easy to send a bullet whizzing through the same opening which served as the means for the view taken by that gleaming

eye. It likewise occurred to the Burker that the Stranglers might have no powder and ball to render their fire-arms available; for he did not remember to have seen them take any such ammunition from about the persons of the murdered travellers.

But what was the Burker to do in order to escape from the enemy, or enemies, as the case might be? While lying flat upon the grass, he was safe from the lasso: but this position could not be maintained for ever. He believed a deadly struggle to be inevitable with whomsoever the well contained; for that it was really an enemy, or enemies, he was equally convinced: or else why should such secret ambush be maintained? After all the horrors endured in respect to reptiles and wild beasts, it was positively a relief to the Burker's mind to reflect that he had now to deal with human beings. It was a warfare more after his own fashion; and as the man naturally possessed a dauntless courage, he was not now to be overawed by the vicinity of a human foe. Indeed he had become so reckless of life that he cared not how soon it was lost: at the same time it was a matter of satisfaction to reflect that if it were now to be surrendered it would not be to a snake nor a wild beast;—and he was resolved also to sell that life of his as dearly as possible.

After some few minutes spent in meditation, he bethought himself of a stratagem to draw the enemy from the ambush, and thereby make himself aware of the number whom he might have to encounter, as well as of the nature of the hostile weapons against which he might be called upon to defend himself. He accordingly feigned to be asleep. Gradually he suffered the hand with which he had shaded his eyes, to fall away from his face and drop upon the grass, with the languid uncontrolled movement of one who was veritably slumbering. At the same time he turned himself a little more sideways, as if the beams of the sun

caused this motion, even on the part of a sleeper; —and he kept one eye just so slightly open that he could still discern anything that might take place at the mouth of the well.

A few more minutes now elapsed—when the Burker beheld a dark countenance appearing above the thicket; and he recognised it to be that of one of the shark-teethed assassins of the two travellers in another part of the jungle. The Strangler was gazing with his penetrating eyes upon him; and being apparently satisfied that the Burker really slept, he drew himself up more and more above the thicket and the stones. He had on his dark scanty garment, just the same as when the Burker had previously seen him: but he seemed to have no weapons of any kind, except the lasso, which was now tied round his waist.

It was a relief to the Burker's mind thus to ascertain the condition in which the Strangler presented himself. Stealthily he stepped forth from his ambush; and he seemed to be alone; for he tarried not to be followed by any companion: nor did he look down into the well to make any sign or to whisper any word. He now laid himself flat upon the grass, and began noiselessly dragging himself towards the Burker. This the Burker by no means liked: for the idea of a subtle poison at the point of some small sharp instrument, instantaneously flashed through his startled brain. For a few moments longer he remained undecided how to act,—while the Strangler was working his noiseless way nearer and nearer towards him. All in a moment the Burker sprang up: but quick as his own movement was that of the Hindoo; and not more quickly do two wild animals close in the deadly strife than did these two men grapple with each other. The Burker was astonished at the degree of strength developed by his opponent,—whose wiry form, with but little flesh upon it, seemed likewise to be endowed with an extraordinary elasticity. The Burker felt that all his own energies were needed; for he read a ferocious desperation in the sinister gleaming eyes of the Strangler. Those two men regarded each other as if the feeling were mutual that the safety of one could only be secured by the death of the other; and thus, after they had grappled together with the lightning-agility already described, they paused for an instant, as if mutually to read each other's purpose in their eyes. Then the struggle commenced.

With a cry that resembled the mingled howl and yell of a wild beast, the Burker endeavoured to hurl his opponent to the ground: but the Hindoo, anticipating the movement, grasped the Burker's neckcloth with such terrific force as almost to strangle him. Then the Burker dealt tremendous blows with his great thick boots at the bare legs of the Strangler; so that the latter, unable to endure the agony, loosened his hold. But not a sound fell from his lips. No accent of either rage or pain escaped him: in total silence did he conduct his hostile proceedings, as if he were dumb.

His hold was loosened but for an instant; and then he closed in such a manner with the Burker that the latter was no longer able to use his legs as weapons of offence, but had quite enough to do to prevent himself from being thrown down. Mustering up all his strength—arming himself as it were with all the energies that he could possibly call to his aid, he made a tremendous effort to bring down his foe. But quick as lightning the Hindoo darted away to a little distance: in the twinkling of an eye the lasso was taken from over the folds of his garment; and its length was flung forth as rapidly as the boa constrictor had ere now thrown itself from the tree upon the tiger.

The Burker was however fully on his guard; and as the noose approached him he caught it in his hand. With a sudden jerk it was torn away; and the Strangler disappeared amidst the bushes and long grass at a little distance. The Burker waited for some minutes with all the keen wariness of one who was not to be taken by surprise: but the Strangler re-appeared not. The man sat down to rest himself, still however keeping his eyes fixed upon the spot where the Hindoo had vanished. Half an hour passed, and no sign was there of the Strangler: no sound indicated his return. The Burker gave vent to a bitter imprecation that the encounter should have finished in such a manner; for he could not help thinking that his enemy would dog him through the jungle in the hope of taking him unawares. Thus the Burker's position acquired a new horror; for he was not only exposed to the ferocious attacks of wild beasts and the more stealthy hostility of reptiles, but he had now to guard against a monster in human shape possessing the fierceness of the former and the subtlety of the latter.

He rose, and continued his way: but like Robinson Crusoe on the island, after having seen the print of a man's foot upon the sand, he kept looking around him, with anxious uneasiness and nervous alarm, in every direction. Thus he toiled on through the jungle until night began to close in; and then, utterly exhausted, he felt the absolute necessity of seeking some place where he might repose. But where was he to find such a spot? Perhaps the Strangler was at no great distance?—perhaps he had been creeping on amidst the bushes and the long grass, heedless of the venomous reptiles that might be lurking there?—peradventure even at that moment he might be within a few yards of the Burker, waiting for an opportunity to throw his lasso with better effect than on the former occasion. The wretched English criminal was goaded almost to desperation; and again did thoughts of suicide enter his head. He now walked feebly and like a drunken man, with the sense that if he were to stop short he must sink down, and probably become a prey to the unseen enemy whom he believed to be dogging his footsteps.

Such was the Burker's state of mind and such his physical condition, when, as the dusk was closing in around him, he beheld a clump of trees which by their configuration he thought he had seen before. Yes—he felt convinced of it! He looked about him—he beheld some other object which was familiar: he was in the neighbourhood of the very cave where he had previously found an asylum, and where unseen hands had afforded him the means of appeasing his hunger. He experienced a feeling of relief, while he marvelled that by a long circuitous route his wanderings should thus have brought him back to a place which he had fancied to have been abandoned for ever.

The cave was soon reached; and the Burker's first thought was to look and see if there were any provisions in the niche under the loophole: but there were none. He set about to fortify the cavern with even greater precautions than he had used on the former occasions; and when his task was accomplished, he partook of the food and liquor which he still possessed, and of which he had a supply sufficient for the morrow. His former experiences at the cave had led him to believe, or at least to hope that it was safe against the intrusion of venomous reptiles: but how far secure it might prove against the designs of his human foe, he knew not. He therefore dreaded the approach of slumber when he felt a drowsiness stealing over him; and in order to shake it off he rose up and walked about the cave, which penetrated to the distance of about six or seven yards under the hill in which it was hollowed. All of a sudden his foot kicked against something soft—apparently a human form. A cry of alarm was on the very point of bursting from the Burker's lips, as he fancied that it might possibly be the Strangler who had got before him to that hiding-place: but he kept back the exclamation at the very instant that it was about to peal forth: for though his foot had come in strong concussion with that object, whatever it were, there was no movement on its part. The Burker stooped down, in the utter darkness which prevailed in the cave; and full of horrified suspense he passed his hand over the object. He encountered garments of some sort; and now his hand came in contact with *another* hand: but its touch was that of death! There was a human corpse in that cave.

The Burker's blood congealed in his veins: he shuddered from head to foot: a glacial horror took possession of him. He had barricaded himself in that cave with a corpse!—his soul revolted in superstitious dread from the unseen body; and yet he dared not dash down his granite barriers and issue forth from that cavern, for fear of becoming a prey to the terrible Strangler who might be lurking outside. But, oh! to pass an entire night—short though an Eastern night be—in that den, along with a dead body,—the idea was intolerable!. If he had seen it—if he knew precisely how it looked—if he were aware of the manner in which the person had died—it would be all different: but he was utterly ignorant on these points. He sat himself down in the cave, near the barricade at the entrance, so as to be as remote as possible from the subject of his horror; and then ten thousand hideous ideas began trooping through his mind. He fancied he could hear the corpse move—that it was gliding towards him as noiselessly as the Strangler was creeping to approach him some hours back; and the wretched man thus went on giving way to his terrific imaginings until his hair stood on end, his eyes were staring through the darkness in wildest—almost frenzied horror. No inclination had he for slumber now: no need was there to battle against a sensation of drowsiness; for it stole not over him: he was broad awake;—never was he more completely awake in his whole life!

Thus the hours passed on,—hours that constituted one long mortal agony for that wretched, wretched man. It was not enough to endure the horrors and dangers of the jungle—the perils of wild beasts, of serpents, and of monsters in human form: but even in the cave which he had at least fancied to be a comparatively sure retreat, he found himself a prey to thoughts and feelings which were sufficient to drive him to madness. Not once did the man close his eyes that night: but there he sat, irresistibly abandoning himself to reflections and misgivings which would have made almost any other person suddenly shriek forth as a maniac. At length the glimmering of dawn began to penetrate through the interstices of the barrier he had fixed at the entrance of the cavern: but still the end of the cave remained enveloped in total darkness. Morning advances rapidly in the eastern clime; and the sun soon poured forth its full effulgence. The Burker's mind felt relieved; and he began to remove the barricade from the mouth of the cavern. When this task was accomplished, he advanced towards the dead body, and drew it forward by the feet until the light revealed the entire form completely to the Burker's eyes. It was the body of an old Hindoo, with a long grey beard; and its dress enabled the Burker to comprehend that the man had been one of those Gossoons, or wandering Dervishes, whom he had seen during his journey from Calcutta to Inderabad, when a prisoner in the suite of Queen Indora and her husband. But how came the man by his death?—was it from natural causes? had he in illness dragged himself to that cave to die? or had he, when reposing there, been suddenly smitten by the hand of the destroying angel? The Burker knew not. There were no marks of violence upon the old man's person: but as the Burker examined him more and more closely, he perceived two little spots close together upon the calf of one of the thin emaciated legs. These spots resembled the punctures of a lancet, or of some other small sharp-pointed instrument. They were of a livid hue on the dusky skin of the deceased; and it was only after the closest inspection that they were discernible at all. The Burker did not however fancy that these were in any way connected with the man's death; and he therefore came to the conclusion that he had died from some natural cause.

Issuing forth from the cave, the Burker looked cautiously about,—keeping himself upon his guard against the deadly lasso of the Strangler: but no one was to be seen. He dragged the corpse completely out of the cavern; and he found that in a species of wallet which the dead Gossoon had about his person, there was a quantity of cold boiled rice. The Burker could not afford to let pass such an opportunity of replenishing his own knapsack, even though the provender had been lying for hours in such near contact with a corpse. While he was engaged in transferring the rice to his wallet, he suddenly beheld three persons advancing from a little distance. He started up from his kneeling posture, and rapidly scrutinised them with mingled hope and apprehension. They might prove friendly disposed and help him to escape from the depths of the dreadful jungle: or they might prove as hostile as the Stranglers themselves. He saw that they were three Gossoons; and now he was smitten with the dread that they might fancy he had murdered the individual who lay at his feet.

They advanced rapidly, and at first showed by their looks that they were surprised at finding a European of his appearance in such a spot as that: then their eyes fell upon the corpse that lay upon the ground—and with shouts of mingled rage and horror they rushed towards the Burker. Two of them had huge clubs—the third had a long knife, which he drew from his girdle and brandished menacingly. The Burker made vehement signs to testify his innocence, and likewise to make the Gossoons aware that he had found the corpse in the cavern. They seemed to comprehend him: but two of them held him fast, while the third proceeded to examine the corpse with the minutest scrutiny. We should observe that they were all three men of middle age—strong built, powerful, and looking more like ferocious depredators than the votaries of a religious sect.

All of a sudden the man who was examining the dead body, pointed out the little punctures to the view of his comrades: and they at once let go their hold upon the Burker. They then all three began lamenting after their own rude fashion,—howling, beating their breasts, and making horrible contortions; while the one who possessed the knife, took it and hacked himself in half-a-dozen places until he was covered with his own gushing blood. The other two took the knife in their turns, and did the same to themselves,—while the Burker looked on with horror lest they should expect him to follow their example, or should else offer to perform the disagreeable service for him. But they were evidently paying no attention to him: they seemed fully satisfied that he was *not* the murderer of their brother-gossoon; and thus, as the Burker's confidence revived, he began to reflect on what had taken place. That the Gossoons regarded the punctures as the cause of their friend's death, he felt convinced; and the idea stole into his mind that they were produced by the bite of a snake. If so, then even that cave itself was not proof against the fearful visitations of the stealthy reptiles!—and the man's blood curdled with horror at the idea that he had possibly passed the night in that cavern with the very serpent that had pierced the unfortunate dervish with its envenomed fangs.

The three Gossoons at length made an end of their lamentations; and they addressed the Burker in their own language: but he could not comprehend a syllable they said—neither did they understand him when he spoke to them in his English vernacular. They now intimated by signs that he was to leave them: he joined his hands in entreaty—but they shook their heads sternly, and motioned him to depart. Again he persevered in his endeavour to give them to understand that he besought permission to accompany them: but their signs only grew more peremptory—and the knife was brandished before his eyes:—he was therefore compelled to sling on his knapsack and hasten away.

But as he moved off, the thought occurred to him that the Gossoons might probably only require his temporary absence while they performed some rites or ceremonies in respect to the deceased. He therefore resolved to watch them from a distance, and to approach them again if he beheld a suitable occasion. They however seemed determined that he should leave their vicinity altogether; and they quickly disabused him in respect to his last hope: for the one who was armed with a knife, followed the Burker for a little while; and every time he looked round, the Gossoon kept making impatient signs for him to hasten still farther away.

The wretched man was thus debarred of the chance which for a little while had seemed to favour him, of being guided out of that dreadful jungle. He continued his way; and when the Gossoon was no longer in sight, he sat down by the side of a rock from which a crystal spring gushed forth. With that water he refreshed himself: but he still remained sitting there, pondering most despondingly his forlorn and desolate condition. Every now and then he awoke as it were with a kind of start from his reverie, and flung his anxious looks around, with the dread lest the Strangler were creeping stealthily towards him. He however beheld no one; and after a while he resolved to continue his way once more. He was pursuing his path along a rough uneven ground,—always taking care to avoid the vicinity of trees as much as possible, and likewise to avoid the long grass, when he was suddenly startled by a rustling amongst some shrubs at a little distance; and the next moment he beheld a black animal, considerably larger than a cat, rush forth in pursuit of some smaller prey. It was a panther of diminutive size: but the instant it caught sight of the Burker it bounded towards him. The man turned to fly; for the green eyes of the panther gleamed at him with a terrible fierceness: but all in a moment a strange cry or yell of agony reached his ears; and glancing back, he observed that the panther had been seized upon by a cobra di capello of considerable size—the largest indeed that the Burker had as yet seen since first he set foot upon the soil of India. He remained not however to witness the result of the conflict between the animal and the reptile: but he sped on with all the swiftness that he could command. Without at first perceiving it, he was retracing his way towards the cave: but he did not become aware of the fact until he reached the rock from whose side the crystal spring was gushing forth.

Almost maddened by the sense of this last peril which he had escaped,—once again embracing the hope that by means of piteous entreaty he might induce the Gossoons to guide him out of the jungle—and too reckless of life not to seek their presence once more, even though he should perish by the sharp blade which they had used against their own persons,—the Burker resolved to go back to the cavern. It was now by no means difficult for him to find his way thither: but when he came in sight of the eminence in the bowels of which it was hollowed, he beheld nothing of the Gossoons. Nor as he drew near its entrance did he behold the corpse of the deceased on the spot where he had last seen it. It struck him that the Gossoons had probably buried it, and that they might be reposing themselves in the cave. Assuming an aspect of the most piteous entreaty, he approached the cavern: but he beheld no one within. He however saw a wallet lying upon the ground; and he recognised it as that which had belonged to the deceased, and from which he had taken the rice. Before he touched it he assured himself that no one was in the cavern,—the dead

Gossoon as well as the living ones had disappeared.

Remembering that there were two compartments to the deceased's wallet, and that he had only examined one, he now lifted it up. In the second compartment he found nothing but the means of striking a light. By this discovery he was however gratified: for it enabled him to make a minute investigation of the cave. He was resolved to establish this cavern as his abiding-place, with the hope that some kindly disposed Gossoon would sooner or later pass that way and guide him out of the jungle. He had seen enough to convince him that it was used as a halting-place for wanderers and wayfarers passing through that frightful wilderness; and he likewise fancied that it was the securest spot he could find in respect to wild beasts and reptiles. In that jungle no place was altogether secure; for it was evident that even there a snake had stolen in and bitten the old Gossoon, probably while he was sleeping. Still in a district where every spot was perilous, this certainly appeared to be the least so of any. At all events it was better to remain stationary there than to go floundering about amidst the pathless wilds where every step was taken at the risk of his life.

Having made himself a torch of a resinous branch—holding it in one hand, and with a tolerably stout stick in the other—the Burker entered the cave. It was only at the innermost extremity beyond the loophole, that it was quite dark: but now the torch illuminated it fully. He advanced cautiously, fearful lest at any moment a reptile should spring at him: he examined every crevice and corner; and he was just on the point of turning away with the conviction that the cavern was completely free from any insidious foe of the reptile species, when all of a sudden the light of his torch was reflected in two small gleaming objects at the extremity of the cavern, about a foot from the ground, and just in front of him. They were the eyes of a reptile; and the blood ran cold in his veins. In a few moments the snake glided out from the hole where it was previously lurking: with a frightful hiss it raised itself up, and expanded its hood preparatory to taking the fatal spring—for it was a cobra. That strong shudder on the Burker's part was instantaneously followed by the complete recovery of all his presence of mind; for he was rendered desperate by the sense of danger; and just at the very moment that the reptile was about to dart at him, he struck it a blow with his stick. The aim was well taken: the serpent writhed in agony—but another blow despatched it.

Having thrown the snake forth from the cave, the Burker proceeded to examine it in every part with the closest possible scrutiny: but he discovered not another hole. He thrust his stick into the one whence the reptile had emerged: but there was no reason to imagine that there were any other snakes in the same ambush. He however stopped up the hole; and his examination being over, he bethought himself of a means of protecting the entrance of the cave from the insidious visits of such fearful guests for the future. He remembered that the houses on the outskirts of Inderabad had all gravel laid down at their doors; and as the fellow was not wanting in ingenuity nor keenness, it occurred to him that so invariable a custom must have a specific object:—and what object could it be if not for the very one which he at all events now resolved to adopt as a suggestion? It moreover seemed to him natural enough that the reptile species would not drag their bellies over substances that might cut, graze, or wound them. He therefore began to chip off and break up pieces of the granite blocks which lay strown about; and in this manner he occupied himself for the remainder of the day—taking good care however to be upon his guard against the insidious approach of that human reptile—the Strangler.

Before the dusk began to close in, the Burker had covered a large space of ground in front of the cave with the little fragments of granite; and thus for a distance of about six yards in length and three in width was this defence-work formed. Having reconstructed his barrier, he sat down in the cavern to partake of his food; and his meal being finished, he found slumber stealing upon his eyes. Even before he was completely asleep—and while only cradled in the dreamy repose which precedes total slumber—the image of the Strangler kept rising into his mind; so that every now and then he was startled into complete wakefulness; and then with the cold perspiration upon his brow he listened with suspended breath. Sometimes he almost fancied that he heard some one moving about in the vicinage of the cavern, or that his barricade of stones was being disturbed. Once or twice he imagined that he heard some one breathing quite near him inside the cave; and it was a long time before he could satisfy himself that all this was mere fancy. At length he fell into a profound slumber.

He knew not how long it lasted: but he was wakened up with the horribly oppressing conviction of some imminent peril. Again he listened with suspended breath; and gradually upon his ear came the sound of a stone being removed from the mouth of the cavern. Still he listened,—his blood curdling in his veins. Yes—that sound was continued! Slowly and slowly was one of the granite blocks of his barrier being removed from its setting. By the glimmering light which prevailed outside, he could discern the gradual disappearance of the stone from the uppermost layer. He now knew that an enemy was at work:—and what foe could this be unless the one of whose stealthy proceedings he had already received such proof?

How should he act? Many minutes elapsed before, in the horror of his feelings, he could make up his mind. At length he decided upon the course to be pursued. Taking it for granted it *was* the Strangler, he resolved to allow him to continue his work, and then ascertain in what manner his insidiously hostile demonstration was to be made. Perhaps he intended to form a sufficient aperture to introduce his person into the cavern, under the impression that the Burker slept; and if this were the case, the Englishman knew that he should be enabled to seize his enemy at a disadvantage and grapple with him successfully. He therefore pretended to sleep, while in reality continuing to keep a keen watch; and one after another he beheld four or five stones removed from their setting. He was ready at any instant to spring up and

seize upon any form that might seek to introduce itself through the aperture. And sure enough, this was the intention of his enemy: for presently the aperture was completely darkened, and the form began to penetrate. Like a snake ready to dart from its coil, was the Burker prepared to spring: but whether it were that he made some slight movement, or that he suddenly held his breath in a way to convince the foe that he was not really asleep, we cannot say. Certain however it was that the enemy's form was all in a moment withdrawn, noiselessly though rapidly; and the Burker rubbing his eyes, fancied that it must be a dream: the stones were restored to their setting, just as he had originally placed them; the aperture was filled up; and only the feeble glimmerings through the interstices met his view. All this too was done with no more noise than a pin would make in falling: nor from the slightest sound could he judge at what moment his enemy retired from the vicinity of the cave. The Burker however slept no more for the remainder of that night.

When morning came, he removed his barrier, and issued cautiously from the cavern. He was miserably desponding and low-spirited. His worst fears were confirmed—the Strangler was resolved to have his life. And now, might not that mortal enemy abandon the idea of carrying on his warfare unassisted?—might he not invoke the succour of the comrade whom he had with him at the time the two travellers were murdered?—and might they not fall boldly and openly together upon the Burker during the day-time? Resolved in such a case to sell his life as dearly as possible, the man procured a stout, strong, knotted cudgel, with which he knew that he could do desperate execution. But still he felt as if frightful perils hung over his head; and how anxiously—oh! how anxiously he kept watching for the appearance of some Gossoon or other traveller who might be inclined to show a friendly spirit towards him.

Several hours passed: the sun was at its meridian height, pouring down its vertical beams,—when the Burker, sitting in the shade of the entrance to his cavern, thought that he heard a sort of splashing noise in the direction of the spring of crystal water that gushed out behind the rock. Snatching up his club, he issued forth—passed noiselessly round the rock—and found himself face to face with the Strangler. The Hindoo had most probably slipped down while endeavouring to climb that part of the rock in order to *reconnoitre* previous to an attack.

Like a wild beast did the Burker fly at the Strangler, at whom he levelled a terrific blow with his bludgeon: but the Hindoo dexterously caught the weapon with his hand; and once again did the two men close in the struggle. For several minutes it was maintained with desperate energy and on equal terms: but all in a moment, just as the Burker, after a forcefully administered kick with his heavy boot upon the bare shin of his opponent, was about to follow up the advantage gained thereby and hurl him to the ground, the Strangler fastened his sharp-pointed teeth upon the Englishman's arm. Through coat-sleeve and shirt penetrated those shark-like teeth: deep into the Burker's flesh they plunged; and the wretch roared with the pain. Then, with lightning rapidity, away flew the Strangler: out came the lasso; and it whistled through the air. But with equal rapidity did the Burker, maddened by the pain of his wound, rush in towards his foe: the noose of the lasso fell beyond him: the Strangler was stepping backward with marvellous agility, gathering in his cord at the same time to hurl it again—when he tripped over something and fell backward. The Burker was instantaneously upon him: but we should observe that the bludgeon had been dropped upon the spot where they first closed in the struggle.

Ill fared it now with the Strangler: for the Burker's knee was upon his chest, and a series of tremendous blows dealt by his stout fist, half stunned the Hindoo. The Burker seized the cord, and slipped the noose over the head of his enemy; it tightened round the Strangler's neck, startling him up into fullest life. But the Burker pulled and pulled with ferocious vigour and determination; and diminishing the length of the lasso, he applied his foot to the Strangler's back in order to attain a purchase to pull the cord more tightly still. Terrific were the writhings, the convulsions, and the contortions of the miserable Hindoo: he seemed as if he possessed a marvellous tenacity for life; and several minutes elapsed ere death put an end to his agonies. But at length he lay a corpse at the feet of the Burker.

Scarcely was the tragedy completed, when a wild and mournful cry thrilled through the torrid stagnant air; and as the Burker turned quickly round, terribly startled by that cry, he caught a transient glimpse of a human form plunging into the midst of a maze of trees at a distance. Evanescent though that glimpse were, yet did the Burker behold enough to convince him that it was the Strangler's friend whom he had just seen, and from whose lips that rueful lamentation pealed forth. Now therefore, scarcely had the Burker gotten rid of one enemy when he experienced the consciousness of being exposed to the insidious proceedings of another; and thus, in the first flush of the signal victory he had obtained, was a damp thrown upon his spirits, and he felt the necessity of being as much as ever upon his guard.

Retaining possession of the lasso with which he had achieved his conquest, the Burker dragged the dead body into the midst of some long grass at a distance;—and there he left it. Returning to his cave, he sat down to deliberate whether he should continue to abide there until the arrival of some friendly-disposed person to guide him out of the jungle—or whether he should make one more desperate effort, unassisted and alone, to find an issue from that wilderness of horrors. That the surviving Strangler would haunt him with a restless pertinacity, and watch every opportunity to avenge the death of his comrade, the Burker had no doubt. Whether, therefore, he should remain where he was to dare that danger—or whether he should once more encounter the hideous perils of the pathless jungle,—these were the alternatives which he now seriously pondered. But when he thought of all the horrors he had experienced during his wanderings—when he shudderingly remembered how the boa constrictor had flung itself down from the tree upon the tiger, and how he had heard the bones of the animal crashing and crushing in the enor-

mous folds of the reptile—he dared not incur the chance of becoming the victim of so horrible a doom. His decision was therefore taken in favour of a continued residence at the cavern.

The remainder of that day passed without any incident worthy of importance; and when the sun was sinking towards its western couch, the Burker began to prepare his barricade as usual. The night went by without producing any subject for alarm—though for the first several hours the man could not close his eyes in slumber. At length sleep stole upon him, induced by a drowsiness which he could not possibly shake off; and he slumbered on until he was awakened by the sounds of a strange music resembling that of a flageolet, but with harsher and more discordant notes. The beams of morning were penetrating through the interstices of the barrier at the mouth of the cavern; and the Burker, starting up, rubbed his eyes,—at the same time fancying that he had heard the music only in a dream. But no:—the sounds still continued; and hastening to remove some of the upper stones of the barrier, the Burker beheld a spectacle which for a moment filled him with joy, and the next instant struck him with unspeakable horror.

CHAPTER CLVII.

THE ITINERANTS.—THE COBRA.

At a little distance from the cavern, several Hindoo natives, male and female, were seated upon the grass. They were in number perhaps a dozen; and it was the sight of these human beings which inspired the man with his first feeling of joy. But a little apart from the group sat a hideous-looking old Hindoo, with half-a-dozen cobra di capellos dancing in front of him. Behind him stood a younger man, who was playing on the pipe, or flageolet, to the music of which the hideous reptiles were thus disporting. All of a sudden the old man caught up a snake in each hand, and suffered the reptiles to coil themselves up his arms: then he took up two more, which he placed round his neck; and the remaining two he encouraged to twist themselves about his legs. The hoods of the serpents were expanded: but all the time that they twirled and coiled and twisted about the man's half-naked form, their heads and necks sustained a continuous oscillating motion, evidently in obedience to the influence of the music. It was this spectacle which so speedily turned the Burker's first feeling of joy into a cold shuddering horror.

Averting his eyes from that portion of the scene, he examined more attentively the other persons belonging to the group. They consisted of young men and women, all the latter being of an exceeding beauty. These females were dressed in short white skirts; and they had bands of linen over the bosom and passing round the back: but the interval between these slight zones, or corsets, and the skirts themselves, was left entirely bare. Their limbs were modelled to the most admirable symmetry: they were nearly all of tall figure; and their shapes were faultless. The linen bands over the bosom were so arranged, by crossing each other in the middle of the chest, to give the full rounded development to the bust itself; and in this particular they were as well formed as in their general symmetry. They were near enough for the Burker to distinguish the lustre of their fine dark eyes, as well as the pearly whiteness of the teeth that shone between the rich lips like white seeds in the midst of a fruit of luscious redness. They were lounging in voluptuous attitudes upon the grass, laughing and chatting gaily with their male companions, and now and then bestowing a look upon the old man who was exhibiting his feats with the reptiles. But to those beholders the feats themselves were evidently no novelty; and therefore the Burker imagined that the snake-charmers and the dancers all belonged to one party, and that the former (that old man and the young one with the flageolet) were merely practising their performances. That these girls and their male companions were itinerant dancers the Burker had no doubt: for he had seen such parties before, during his journey from Calcutta to Inderabad.

That the itinerants would prove friendly disposed towards him he had sufficient hope: but that they at present suspected there was any looker-on at their proceedings he had no reason to fancy. He was about to throw down the barrier and reveal himself, when the dancers, as if with one accord, all started up and began to practise their own special performances. The Burker thought that he would wait until they had finished; and he accordingly remained a still unseen spectator of all that was progressing.

The dance began, slowly at first—the girls evidently practising the most voluptuous movements of their forms. Nothing could be more sensual than their attitudes and their movements,—which they made their countenances, especially the eyes, follow as it were with a kindred expression. The young men who danced with them, imitated them in these respects: for nothing can exceed the licentiousness of these dances on the part of those professional itinerants in Hindostan.

At length the dance was concluded; and the performers threw themselves in voluptuous languor upon the grass: but still the old man continued his feats with the serpents—while the younger one sustained the strange discordant music of the flageolet. The Burker was now upon the point of throwing down the barricade and revealing himself to the itinerants,—when all of a sudden a terrific howl, or rather ferocious yell, burst upon every ear; and forth from an adjacent thicket darted an enormous tiger, apparently leaping with a single bound for at least a dozen yards. With the wildest shrieks the women sprang to their feet—while fearful cries of horror and alarm pealed from the lips of the men. Flight became general, with the single exception of the old snake-charmer; for it was upon him that the tiger pounced with that terrific bound which it made. Encircled as he was with the twisting snakes, was he thus seized by the ravenous animal, and borne off, yelling fearfully, into the thicket whence the brute had emerged. The Burker sank down in his cavern, horrified at this scene: but in a few moments the evidences of the old man's agony ceased—death had no doubt put a termination to his frightful sufferings—and he was feeding the bloodthirsty maw of the tiger.

But when the Burker ventured to peep forth again from his hiding-place, not a human form was to be seen: the dancers and the flageolet-player had all vanished. Maddened and desperate at having lost this chance of being guided forth from that dreadful wilderness, the Burker hurled down his barricade and rushed out, in the hope of distinguishing the forms of the fugitives, in whatsoever direction they had taken. But he beheld them not;—and throwing himself upon the ground, he beat his breast and tore his hair with mingled rage and disappointment. Heaven itself seemed to be warring against him. If he beheld human beings in that jungle, it was first in the form of travellers who were to be assassinated before his eyes —then in the form of Stranglers seeking his own life—or in the shape of wandering Dervishes who would have no communion with him; and lastly, when there appeared to be every prospect of falling in with friendly-disposed persons, the jungle vomited forth one of its most dreadful monsters to scare them away. No wonder that the wretched man should fling himself upon the ground, and lie writhing and convulsing there with a mental anguish as terrible as if he were enduring the agonies of death!

But after awhile the fury of his enraged disappointment abated; and he rose up from the ground. He now looked about him on the spot whence the itinerants had disappeared; and no trace of their recent presence did he behold, except a small box and a wicker basket close by the place where the old snake-charmer had been seated. Remembering now that hideous spectacle of the cobras which had filled him with so much horror, the Burker was struck aghast with the idea that those reptiles had doubtless uncoiled themselves and escaped amidst the thicket into which the old Hindoo was carried off by the tiger. In what frightful proximity therefore were these serpents now to him and to his abiding-place! The tiger too might still be lurking there; and at any moment he himself might become the animal's victim. But so desperate was his position that he became nerved as it were with a sullen moody recklessness; and gradually the idea crept into his mind that those cobras which he had seen dancing must have been deprived of their venomed fangs expressly for those performances. The Burker proceeded to open the box, which he found to contain a quantity of provisions, chiefly cold boiled rice. The basket was empty; and he had no doubt it was a receptacle for the snakes which had belonged to the unfortunate old charmer. He conveyed the box of provisions to his cavern; and at the next meal that he made he consumed the last of the spirits which remained in the gourd.

The sullen desperation of his mood having abated—or rather, we should say, given place to a returning carefulness for his life, he began to think of erecting his barricade once more, even though it were only the forenoon of the day, in order to guard against an attack on the part of the tiger. But how was it possible for him to remain shut up day and night within that cavern? No!—he felt that with such imprisonment he should go mad; he therefore resolved upon running any risk rather than dooming himself to such a tomb-like immurement. Besides, every now and then he required to slake his thirst at the spring which welled forth from behind the rocky hill, into the bowels of which the cavern penetrated. He could not therefore shut himself up altogether in the cave itself!

Several hours passed: the sun had gone considerably beyond its meridian,—when, as the Burker was standing on the top of the rocky hill, anxiously straining his eyes in the hope of discerning some human form in the distance, he was startled by a terrific rushing din on the side of a grove of tall trees about two hundred yards off. From that wood emerged at least forty or fifty elephants, speeding onwards as if goaded by some frightful apprehension that had taken possession of them all. The Burker was transfixed to the spot with terror at this spectacle. Some of the elephants were of immense size: but notwithstanding the unwieldiness of their bulky forms, they rushed on with remarkable speed, flourishing their trunks and sending forth the strangest sounds.

This herd of wild elephants seemed to be making straight for the very hill upon which the Burker was posted. On they came, trampling down the long grass, the brakes, and the thickets, in the midst of which all the lower parts of their huge uncouth forms were buried; and at length the Burker, galvanized into the sudden power of motion from his transfixed state of horrible alarm, was preparing to fly. But all in a moment he beheld the herd of elephants halt: those which were foremost turned round—and they all seemed to commence an attack upon some enemy that was in their midst. Full soon the Burker became aware what sort of an enemy this was; for the terrific howls of a tiger came pealing upon his ear. He looked on with indescribable suspense, where that strange and fearful scene was taking place. The elephants exhibited a rage and desperation which were only proportionate with the enormous peril against which they were combating. The conflict however lasted not many minutes: for all of a sudden an object was whirled up into the air—and the Burker could distinguish the tiger as it thus for an instant turned round with its lithe supple form, ere with a hideous yell it fell down again amidst its enemies. And now the Burker could see the elephants rush in upon it; and by their movements he knew that they were trampling it under foot. For a few moments its howls lasted, full of mortal agony, and growing fainter and fainter until they ceased altogether. Then away sped the elephants,—the whole herd appearing to follow one that acted as its leader. Through the wilds of the jungle went those unwieldly brutes with an astonishing degree of speed, until the wood hid them from the Burker's view.

He now began to breathe freely, as he sat down on the top of the rocky hill to rest after the exhausting effect which the tension of his feelings produced upon his physical being. But he began to reflect that he might have some reason to congratulate himself on the spectacle he had just witnessed; for it was probably the tiger which had carried off the snake-charmer, that had thus met its death amidst the infuriate elephants. At all events there was one wild beast the less in the vicinity of the cavern; and such a circumstance was a subject for self-felicitation on the part of the Burker. He remained for some while seated

on the top of the hill; and then, having again slaked his thirst with the gushing waters of the pellucid spring, he passed round the rocky eminence in order to reach the entrance of his cavern, that he might partake of his evening meal. Having eaten of his provisions, he felt an exceeding drowsiness stealing upon him, most probably from having remained so long upon the eminence exposed to the sultry fervour of the sun. So strong became this inclination to sleep, that he could not battle against it; and yet he knew that the projecting barrier was not raised at the mouth of the cavern. After a vain effort to shake off the increasing somnolence, the Burker yielded himself to it; and falling back on the ground of the cave, he sank into sleep.

Horrible dreams speedily began to troop in unto his mind: a hideous nightmare seized upon him; and he felt an oppression upon the chest that it appeared as if the hand of death itself were thus lying heavily on him. Never had his visions been so horrible before, frightful though many of his dreaming experiences had been beneath the roof of that very cavern. How long he slept he knew not: but he was suddenly startled up into complete wakefulness; and then a monstrous cobra upreared its hooded head from his breast and hissed at him. The man shrieked out in his mental agony: the cobra darted his head forward as if to seize him on the face with its fangs; and the Burker sank back insensible.

When he came back to consciousness, he shuddered with the awful recollection of what he had endured, and which now appeared to be a hideous dream. The dusk was closing in; and he started up to his feet, mechanically clutching his club which lay by his side. Still trembling and quivering all over under the influence of his hideous recollections—with the perspiration standing cold and clammy upon his forehead—the Burker was

rushing out of the cavern, when a horrible hissing smote his ears; and within a yard of his foot the monstrous cobra raised itself up to dart at him. He sprang back,—at the same instant hurling his club at the reptile. The blow was well aimed: it struck down the cobra, which lay writhing upon the bed of granite in front of the cavern. With a stone, hastily snatched up, the Burker despatched his enemy.

It was no vision, then, which had haunted him during his slumber!—it was a terrific reality; and he had slept with a cobra upon his breast! The man's form kept convulsing and shuddering with nervous horror at the bare idea. Indeed, many minutes elapsed ere he could regain sufficient self-possession for deliberate thought. Then the reflection began to creep into his mind that the cobra he had just destroyed must be one of those that he had seen with the snake-charmer, and that his notion of the morning was correct: namely, that its fangs had been withdrawn. For if this were not the case, how could he possibly have escaped with his life? But the incident made the Burker aware of one thing—which was that his mat of granite fragments in front of the cavern was not a complete protection against the intrusion of reptiles.

He had now therefore scarcely any heart to take the trouble of building up the barricade at the mouth of his cave. He felt as if he could lay himself down and die,—as if it were impossible to bear up any longer against the accumulating horrors of his position. He was utterly desponding. But still death came not to his call, though he was most painfully conscious of how it might seek him unawares—stealthily and insidiously, by the hand of a Strangler—or violently and abruptly by the jaws of a tiger. He therfore mustered up resolution sufficient for the formation of his barricade; and when the task was accomplished, he sat down in the deepest dejection, in the darkness of his abiding-place.

The night passed without any incident worthy of notice; and when the Burker issued from the cave in the morning, he ascended the little eminence, as was his wont, to ascertain if he could descry any human form in the neighbourhood. He had not been stationed there many minutes, ere he beheld some one advancing through the jungle; and as the person drew nearer, the Burker perceived that he was a Gossoon. The man's heart leapt for joy as he thought that now at last deliverance from that dreadful wilderness was at hand; for he resolved that if the dervish, imitating the example of his predecessors, should refuse him his guidance, he would compel him by violence to succour him in that sense, or else would pertinaciously dog his footsteps and thus be led from the jungle. As the Gossoon drew nearer still, the Burker discerned that he was one of the lowest of the sect of religious itinerants—in fact a wandering beggar, dependent on the alms of charity. These facts his garb and general appearance announced; while his looks were of the most forbidding character. He was about fifty years of age: his hair and beard were grizzled; and he had a strong cast in one eye, which added to his sinister aspect.

The Gossoon seemed surprised for a few moments on beholding an European there: but the Burker, deeming it the most prudent course to assume a demeanour of entreaty, descended from the top of the hillock and made signs to implore the Gossoon to lead him forth from the jungle. The itinerant religionist made some sign of impatience in reply, and at once proceeded to the cave. There he looked in the niche underneath the loophole; and on discovering the Burker's knapsack, he opened it. An expression of delight appeared on his sinister features on finding a provision of boiled rice inside; and coming forth to the entrance of the cavern, he sat himself down to partake of the food. He ate it in a manner so ravenous as to indicate that his fast must have been a long one; and the Burker, thinking to do him a pleasure, took up the gourd, at the same time intimating by a sign that he would go and fill it with water. The Gossoon did not however appear to take any notice of him, so busied was he in cramming the cold boiled rice down his throat. The Burker hastened to fill the gourd at the spring which welled forth behind the rocky hill; and returning to the Gossoon, he presented it to him. But the dervish, with a growl as savage and as sullen as if it came from the throat of a wild beast, repulsed the gourd so rudely that it dropped from the Burker's hand; and then the Gossoon, taking a small flask from the folds of his garments, drained its contents, whatever they were, to the very bottom. Having done this—and without taking any more notice of the Burker—he rose, entered the cavern, threw himself lazily down, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

For a moment the Burker was deeply incensed at the rough uncouth manner in which his gourd had been rejected; and he could not help thinking likewise that in return for his civility the Gossoon might have spared him a drop of the contents of his flask. He did not however make any demonstration of his anger: he thought it better to let the brutal Hindoo enjoy the slumber of which he might possibly find himself in great need after a toilsome journey: and the Burker consoled himself with the hope that when the Gossoon should wake up, the time for his deliverance from the depths of that horrible jungle would be at hand.

Hours passed; still the Gossoon slept on; and still the Burker sat at the entrance of the cavern, anxiously awaiting the moment when the Hindoo should arouse himself. All the rice was gone from the knapsack; for the Gossoon had made light work of the provision which it contained. This was however scarcely a source of uneasiness to the Burker for the present; for he felt assured that his strange companion must have the consciousness of being speedily enabled to procure another supply. And while thus reflecting, the Burker buoyed himself up with the hope that probably they were not so far from the extremity of the jungle as he had previously imagined—or that the Gossoon was acquainted with some outlet that would speedily take them to an inhabited spot.

But time passed on—the day was wearing away—and still the Gossoon slept. The Burker might have supposed that the man was dead, were it not for the unmistakable indications of life which the nasal sounds of his slumber gave forth. Though looking to that dervish as the means by which he hoped to escape from the jungle, the Burker nevertheless hated him—not so much for his uncouth

conduct, as for this procrastination of the journey which he expected to enter upon under his guidance.

For that entire day did the Burker remain sitting in front of the cavern, with the exception of two or three temporary absences to slake his thirst at the spring; and as the sun drew nearer and nearer to the western horizon, the impatience of the Burker grew into a perfect rage. Oh, how he hated that Gossoon!—in what bitter aversion did he hold him—he could have even killed him, so tremendous at length grew his vexation and his spite when he beheld him continuing to enjoy a slumber so profound that it appeared as if it never could have a waking.

At length the Burker, utterly bereft of all patience, was about to lay his hand on the Gossoon's shoulder and shake him with an enraged violence that would speedily dispel his slumber, when the dervish suddenly started up to a sitting posture. He rubbed his eyes—looked at the Burker with a certain air of astonishment as if having totally forgotten that he had seen such a person in that place before—and then springing up, he hastened to inspect the niche underneath the loophole. But there was no food in it; and the Gossoon gave such a hideous howl of rage that the Burker was for an instant frightened lest the sound proceeded from the throat of some wild animal in the immediate neighbourhood. The Gossoon advanced towards the Burker, making threatening signs — pointing to the vacant niche and the empty knapsack, as much as to accuse him of having devoured the provisions which ought to be there? The Burker's temper, never the sweetest at any time, was particularly ruffled by the entire conduct of the Gossoon; and forgetting his conciliatory policy, he replied by signs that were irate and menacing. A terrific expression of rage swept over the Gossoon's countenance; and suddenly seizing the Burker with both arms round the body, he lifted him up and dashed him down upon the granite blocks which lay close by the mouth of the cavern.

Herculean was the strength of the Gossoon—a strength too that was exercised with a skill and expertness which made the achievement the work of a single instant. Powerless as a dwarf in the hands of a giant—and taken completely unawares —the Burker was utterly unable to offer any resistance; so that with lightning rapidity did he find himself thus thrown, half-stunned, upon the granite blocks. There he lay for a few instants; and as he slowly picked himself up, it was in the most sombre sullenness of mood that he submitted to this treatment without an effort to avenge it. For in the midst of the concentrated rage and vindictive spite which filled his soul, was the consciousness that even if he had the power to slay the Gossoon, it would be an act of madness, thereby cutting off this last remaining chance of escape from the jungle. For the same reason too, he doggedly resolved to return to his conciliatory policy towards the man on whom he felt himself to be so completely dependent.

The Gossoon surveyed him with a kind of sombre contempt as he slowly raised himself to his feet; and then he grinned with a horrible satisfaction, as if contented with having shown the European that he was his master. That he was well acquainted with the cave the Burker had already perceived, from the fact of his searching the niche so promptly after his arrival; and another proof thereof was now furnished by the circumstance that the Gossoon passed round to the back of the well to drink of the water. The sun was by this time beginning to set; and the Burker therefore knew that it was useless to think of setting out upon a journey through the jungle during the hours of the night. He made a sign to the Gossoon to the effect that he would pile up the stones at the mouth of the cavern: but the itinerant Dervish burst out into a scornful laugh, as if ridiculing such a precaution or means of defence. He set to work to gather together a quantity of dried wood; and he made a sign to the Burker to imitate his example. Fearlessly the Gossoon plunged into the long grass in the thicket, and tore down some branches of the most resinous trees. When an immense quantity of fuel was thus collected, the Gossoon arranged it in the form of a semicircle near the front of the cave; and churlishly motioning the Burker to follow him within the rampart, he set fire to it by the means of ignition which he carried about his person. He then threw himself down in the cavern; and composing himself to sleep, was soon wrapped once more in a slumber as profound as that which throughout the livelong day he had enjoyed.

But the Burker could not sleep. He was half famished with hunger: he trembled lest the Strangler should insidiously work his way, despite the fire, into the cave: he was afraid likewise of the repulsive Gossoon who lay snoring at a little distance. Perhaps the wretch, thought the Burker, was only pretending to be asleep in order to watch an opportunity of taking his life?—though he certainly could not see of what avail such a proceeding would be to the Hindoo. The fire continued to burn steadily for a long time; and as there was no wind, but the night-air was still and stagnant, the smoke beat not into the cavern, but ascended straight upward. At length a sensation of drowsiness began to steal upon the Burker; and after several vain efforts to shake it off, he yielded to its influence. He fell asleep.

Horrible dreams haunted him, as usual; for the mind reproduced with added horror the waking thoughts of the wretched man; and now in imagination he beheld the dead Strangler's companion stealing upon him: he saw the hideous Gossoon bending over him with a terrible ferocity of countenance, and with a long sharp instrument in his hand. Then he fancied that he was in the depths of the jungle's wilds, pursued by a tiger—that he strove to fly—but that his feet became as heavy as if they had turned into lead, and he could not escape the ravenous animal that was every instant gaining upon him. But all of a sudden the subject of his visions changed; and he was writhing and convulsing in the huge folds of a boa constrictor. With a shriek of agony he awoke.

He was lying in the cave: the duskiness of night still prevailed—the fire had sunk into a semicircular pile of smouldering embers, just throwing out light sufficient to show him the eyes of the Gossoon staring wide open as the mendicant dervish still lay stretched along the floor of the cave at a little distance. In which direction the eye with the horrible squint was

looking, the Burker scarcely knew: but the other was fixed upon himself with (he fancied) the gleaming malignity of a reptile's. Then the Gossoon began convulsing and writhing; and all of a sudden he sent forth so wild a yell that it made the Burker literally bound up in horrible alarm, while the blood seemed to congeal in his veins. The Gossoon burst out into a savage laugh, and made signs to show that he was only imitating everything that the Burker had just been doing. Deep but low was the curse which in his own vernacular the Burker gave as he found himself thus rendered the sport of the malignant mockery of that hated Gossoon. But the mendicant Hindoo continued to laugh for some moments; and it seemed to the Burker as if he were thus listening to the malice-mirth of a fiend.

When the Gossoon had finished his hideous cachinnation, he composed himself to sleep again: but the Burker could not close his eyes in slumber any more. In a couple of hours the sun rose—the Gossoon still slept—and the Burker issued forth from the cavern.

CHAPTER CLVIII.

THE GOSSOONS.

HAVING slaked his thirst, which was poignant and most oppressive—for his parched lips were cracked with the fever-heat of his blood, and his tongue was as dry as if he had been swallowing some of the embers of the now extinct fire—the Burker was returning to the mouth of the cavern to await in hope the Gossoon's awakening, when he espied another human form approaching from a little distance. This speedily proved to be a man of the same sect as the Hindoo who had already become the Burker's companion. He was a mendicant Gossoon more wretchedly clad if possible—more filthy in his person, and more repulsive in his looks, than even the other. He was upwards of sixty years of age, and exceedingly tall—without any stoop—but with a frame so emaciated that it was painful to contemplate the parts which his rags left bare. He had a look half savage, half austere; and he growled upon the Burker as if regarding him as an intruder in that spot.

Without however taking any farther notice of him, this old Gossoon proceeded straight to the cavern; and the Burker, following, perceived that the other itinerant suddenly woke up, as if with the instinctive knowledge that an expected friend was at hand. Their greetings were however sullenly and moodily exchanged; and the new-comer almost immediately produced a bag which he carried hidden amongst his rags. Thence he took forth rice, fruits, and fragments of coarse barley bread; and the two Gossoons began to eat with a ravenous appetite. The Burker, half famished, advanced in a supplicating manner towards them; and then the younger Gossoon began telling his comrade something which the Burker speedily understood to be a narrative of the effects produced upon himself by the dreams of the past night. For that malignant Gossoon again went through the imitation of the Burker's convulsive writhings: and he ended by giving vent to another mocking yell more hideous than even that by which he had so startled the English outcast a short while back. The elder Gossoon laughed with a low inward chuckling which was horrible to hear; and then he contemptuously tossed the Burker a part of his provisions. The bag was a large one; and even when three people had partaken of its contents, enough provender evidently remained for three or four more meals of the same extent as this first one. But the old Gossoon had brought with him no liquor; and the crystal spring accordingly supplied the means of washing down the food that was then partaken of.

When the repast was ended, the elder Gossoon addressed in his own language some question to the Burker: but the latter by signs intimated that he was ignorant of what was thus said to him. It soon transpired that the Gossoons themselves were equally at a loss to understand the Englishman; and the two itinerants accordingly conversed together, taking no further notice of the Burker. This individual waited with anxious suspense for some indication of their future plans or movements: but for three mortal hours they stirred not; and when their colloquy was ended, they stretched themselves down to sleep.

The rage and impatience which the wretched outcast had experienced on the preceding day, were now excelled by the feelings which took possession of him when he saw those lazy vagabonds so tranquilly and unconcernedly compose themselves to slumber. But what could he do? He must bide their good-will and pleasure; and to the utmost of his power he must render himself agreeable to them, for fear lest they should leave him behind, as the other Gossoons had done, on taking their departure. He therefore strove to assuage his boiling impatience—to appease his irritated feelings—and to sustain himself with the hope that the moment for egress from that dreadful jungle must come at last.

The Gossoons slept on; and the sun was again sinking towards the western horizon before they awoke. Then the provision-bag was again opened; and a ration was bestowed upon the Burker, though not to the same extent as that which each Gossoon took for himself. The meal being disposed of, they made signs for him to procure them water in the gourd; and then they intimated that he was to collect the firewood to be arranged at the mouth of the cavern. He comprehended that they were using him as their slave: but he was compelled to submit. It was however with shuddering horror that he plunged into the thickets to gather the branches: but the task was achieved without any circumstance calculated to justify his alarm. The pile was built up: the three passed into the cavern; and the wood was lighted. The two Gossoons were speedily buried in profoundest slumber; and the Burker, worn out in mind and body, fell asleep more quickly than on the preceding night. His dreams were again horrible—but not characterized by the same evidences of distress on his part as those which we have described: or at least if they were, he himself awoke in ignorance of the fact—and at all events the Gossoons did not seem to have been disturbed. These itinerants did not awake until some while after sunrise: then the provision-bag was produced—the Burker filled the gourd from the spring—and the morning meal

was partaken of. Afterwards the two Gossoons ascended the hillock; and both looked intently in the same direction from which they themselves had respectively come,—as if they were awaiting another arrival. The Burker began to fear that if the company of Gossoons were increased, he might be abandoned by them, as he was by those who had taken away the dead body with them;—and painful misgivings agitated in the wretched man's soul. That day passed like the preceding one,—the Gossoons sleeping for hours together—the Burker watching at the mouth of the cavern—and having to collect the firewood in the evening. No other Gossoon made his appearance: there was no fresh arrival of any kind; and another night was passed in the cavern.

Again, in the morning, when the meal had been partaken of—and which meal completely emptied the bag,—the two Gossoons ascended the hillock, the Burker following them. No new-comer was to be seen; and there the Gossoons sat, watching in silence for a couple of hours until the heat of the sun became intolerable with its sultriness. Then the dervishes gave vent to ejaculations of mingled rage, astonishment, and disappointment: and the Burker had no difficulty in comprehending the cause. They evidently expected some person or persons, who however came not. They descended into the cavern, and stretched themselves to slumber,—the Burker taking his accustomed post just within the entrance, so as to shade himself against the piercing rays of the sun. It was evening when the Gossoons awoke; and then they both hastened with avidity to inspect the niche under the loop-hole: but there were no provisions there. They made impatient signs to the Burker to inquire whether any one had been?—and on his signaling a negative, they looked as if they were very much inclined to wreak their rage upon himself. It was indeed with a sort of menacing peremptoriness that they pointed to the thicket as an intimation that he should gather the firewood; and he hastened to obey—for he was now more than ever afraid of these men. His fears in that respect so operated upon his mind as to enhance the poignancy of the apprehensions with which he set foot in the thicket—the lurking place of the reptile, and which had likewise recently proved the ambush of the tiger. While treading amidst the long grass, he fancied that cobras were coiling up his legs; and the ice-chill of terror struck to the very marrow of his bones. Upon those bones too did the flesh appear to creep, as he approached the trees from which he had to tear away the branches—those trees whence the fatal coils of the boa constrictor might possibly unwind to fling down its huge slimy length and envelope his form. But his task was achieved without the occurrence of any of these terrible casualties; and he set to work to pile up the wood in front of the cavern.

Whether it were that he was not quick enough in his movements to please the elder Gossoon—or that this individual required some object on whom to wreak the vindictive spite with which hunger filled him—we cannot say: but certain it is that with an ejaculation of rage, he snatched up a stout branch and dealt the Burker a savage blow upon the head. In a moment the Englishman flew like a tiger at the Hindoo: but the latter, suddenly skipping aside, caught the Burker round the waist, just as the other Gossoon had done, and hurled him to a distance with as much ease as if he were merely thus tossing away from him an infant child. Again was the Burker compelled to put up with the rough treatment so sustained; and he had a severe experience that the strength of the elder Gossoon, emaciated a wretch though he were, was in no way inferior to that of his younger companion. Both were his masters, and seemed resolved to prove themselves so. In a mood of sullen resignation and dogged submission, did the Burker continue his task; and when it was completed, he and the two Gossoons stretched themselves supperless to repose. The itinerants speedily slept: but the cravings of hunger kept the Burker awake for the greater part of the night. At length sleep visited his eyes also; and if his dreams were less horrible than usual, it was perhaps because he had all the less to tax or trouble his digestive organs.

In the morning the Gossoons again ascended to the top of the hill,—again too followed by the Burker, who was as much interested as themselves in the arrival of any one bearing a supply of provisions. But no approaching form was to be seen. Crashing through the jungle at a little distance, was that phenomenon, a white elephant—called an *albino*: but it was speedily lost to the view—and the straining eyes of the two Gossoons and the Burker were again riveted in the direction whence the former evidently expected an arrival. And now, the Burker's ideas changing, he began to hope that no one would come after all; for in this case he saw the necessity of the Gossoons leaving the cavern and betaking themselves to the nearest inhabited spot where provisions might be procured,—in which case he was resolved to accompany or to dog them, unless overpowered by their superior brute force.

All of a sudden, however, ejaculations of joy burst from the lips of the Gossoons; for they, with eyes more accustomed to mark the movements of human beings in their own native land, than the Burker's could possibly be, beheld some one advancing. In a short time the Burker himself discerned the form which came hastening along with light step; for the expected individual was quite young. He likewise was a Gossoon—not above two or three and twenty years of age; and he was as remarkable for his personal beauty as those whom he came to join were for their ugliness. He was of the medium stature—slender and well made—with a faultless aquiline profile, and superb eyes. He was attired with somewhat more neatness than the other Gossoons—but still in a poor style; and his person displayed more cleanly habits. He had at his back a wallet, or knapsack, of considerable size: he advanced rapidly, and soon joined the Gossoons and the Burker, who descended from the top of the hillock.

When the new-comer cast a look of wondering inquiry upon the Burker, the Gossoon who had first of all arrived at the cavern, gave a few hasty words of explanation—as the object of the remarks could understand; while the eldest Gossoon, with hands of greedy impatience and ravenous looks, began to take off the knapsack from the new-comer's shoulders. On being opened, it was found to contain a quantity of provisions of a better

sort than any the Burker had as yet seen in the jungle. There were not only rice and fruits, but cakes of bread and pieces of cold meat; and the Gossoons quickly sat down to the welcome meal. The Burker was liberally treated in respect to the food on the present occasion; and when the flask which the young Gossoon produced, had passed round from his own lips to those of his friends, the Burker was not forgotten. He found it to contain the same sort of potent spirit as that which the gourd of the assassinated traveller had furnished him; and encouraged by the apparent friendliness of the Gossoons, he imbibed a deep draught.

The meal being over, the Gossoons proceeded to stretch themselves to sleep in the cavern,—the handsome young new-comer following in this respect the example of his ugly elder comrades. The Burker experienced the soporific effect of the potent alchohol: and yielding to drowsiness, he likewise laid himself down in the cave. Slumber soon stole upon his eyes; and when he awoke the sun was considerably past the meridian. But the Gossoons—where were they? They were not to be seen!

Half wild with despair, the Burker ascended to the top of the rocky hill: but no—not a glimpse of them could he obtain! They had evidently abandoned him to his fate in that horrible wilderness! He cried aloud in his anguish: he mingled lamentations with imprecations: he beat his breast—tore his hair—and dashed his clenched fists violently against his brow. At length his rage began to moderate, even if his distress of mind were not alleviated. He saw that it was useless to trust to travelling Gossoons as guides from the depths of that jungle; and despite all dangers, he would make one more desperate effort to issue thence, or die in the attempt. He bethought himself that all three of the Gossoons had come from precisely the same direction; and it was altogether in an *opposite* direction that his own former attempts had been made to issue from the jungle. Surely those men must have journeyed from a village or hamlet at no great distance? At all events he was determined to push forward in that direction: for sooner than endure the prolonged horrors of the jungle, he would dare all its ghastliest, frightfulest perils!

Having slaked his thirst at the crystal spring—and armed with his stout bludgeon—the Burker set out upon his journey. He strove to call to his aid all his most stubborn courage and dogged resolution. When floundering through the long grass where reptiles might lurk, he said to himself that it was better to die by the bite of the cobra than to endure the long agony of terror, with the prospect of famine in the cave he had just left. When forced by the circumstances of his route to pass near a tree, he strove to persuade himself that it were better to render up existence in the crushing folds of the boa constrictor, than to linger out that life in the awful solitude of the cavern. Or again, when passing near a stream, he thought it were preferable to risk being devoured by the jaws of an alligator, than to continue to be whirled onward by a hurricane of agonizing alarms and a sense of excruciating perils. It was in this manner the wandering outcast endeavoured to sustain his spirits; but, oh! how desperate must he have felt his case to be when it admitted of such horrible consolations!

For about two hours had he advanced, steadily pursuing the direction from which the Gossoons had come—when on emerging upon a sward of short sweet grass, he beheld a dark object lying at a little distance. On approaching it, he found to his surprise that it was the wallet which the youngest Gossoon had brought with him in the morning. On opening it, the Burker found that it contained a considerable quantity of the provender with which it was crammed when first produced; and his wonder was now succeeded by joy. But surprise was soon uppermost again; and this became blended with terror likewise—for how could the wallet be there unless something had happened to the young Gossoon himself? And if he had become a prey to a wild beast, might not that same ferocious animal be still lurking in the neighbourhood? The Burker now discerned upon the grass the traces of footsteps; and, Oh! with what curdling of the blood did he likewise distinguish the spots where the paws of a wild beast—most probably a tiger—had been!

Some minutes elapsed before he could sufficiently compose himself to appropriate the wallet and strap it over his shoulders. He then continued his way—looking around him with cold shuddering apprehension—when his foot kicked against something; and recoiling from the contact, he perceived that it was a human bone. Several other bones lay scattered about; and there was a dark stain upon the ground which confirmed all the dreadful tale. It was a horrible spectacle!—horrible would it have been even for one surveying it with a consciousness of perfect security—but infinitely *more* horrible for one who felt that at any instant he might share the fate of his predecessor on that spot! Close by, too, there were the fragments of apparel: and now the Burker knew, beyond the possibility of doubt, that it was the young Gossoon who had been devoured by a wild beast.

He rushed on, almost maddened with horror, from the spot. He forgot the Strangler—the boa-constrictor—the cobra—the panther—the elephant—and the alligator: he thought of nothing but the tiger. But when another hour had elapsed, and he had continued his way without any fresh alarm, his spirits began to revive somewhat. That the two elder Gossoons had fled from the spot where their more juvenile comrade met so hideous a fate was tolerably evident. Might he not therefore overtake them?—and if so, might he not induce them to serve as his guides? or in any case might he not follow them from a distance?

While he was looking straight before him, with straining eyes to see if he could discern any human forms moving in the distance,—he fancied that his ear caught the sounds of plaintive moans in his immediate vicinage. He stopped and listened. Yes—it was assuredly so; and they appeared to emanate from the foot of a tree about twenty yards off. This tree was completely withered: there was not a single leaf upon it; and thus the eye of the Burker could easily scan all its skeleton branches. No boa constrictor was coiled there; and a horrible feeling of curiosity, surmounting his alarms, led him to draw nearer and nearer by slow degrees towards the foot of that blasted tree. For the moans still continued

to reach his ears; and though disguised as it were by their very plaintiveness, yet had he the conviction that they came from a human tongue. All of a sudden the thicket through which he was advancing, ceased; and then a frightful spectacle met his eyes. For there, at the foot of the tree, lay the oldest of the three Gossoons, encircled in the folds of a boa constrictor, whose tail was coiled round the lower part of that tree's trunk. The reptile raised its head on beholding the Burker—who did not however remain there another instant to contemplate more of that scene of stupendous horror: but he fled, goaded by the agonizing apprehension that the snake might quit its hold upon the Gossoon and mark himself as its prey instead. On he ran,—until breathless and exhausted, he reached a rocky eminence; and on the slope he threw himself down. There he lay for some minutes, until his presence of mind began to return; and he reflected with shuddering horror upon what he had seen. Two of the Gossoons had met a hideous fate:—had the third escaped? or was he likewise doomed to perish in the jungle, to the perils of which *he* as well as *they* had abandoned a fellow-creature? And would the Burker himself issue with his life from that wilderness of dangers—that wild and awful district where death was to be confronted in so many ghastly, frightful, and appalling shapes?

The Burker sat in a despounding mood,—asking himself these questions, and reflecting on all these things,—when it struck him that he heard a slight rustling sound higher up behind; and starting with the idea that a reptile was gliding towards him, he just escaped the noose of a lasso which was thrown at his head. For there, upon that rocky eminence, stood the Strangler—the remaining companion of him whom the Burker had slain. With a cry of vindictive rage, the Burker sprang up the slope, on the top of which the shark-teethed Hindoo tarried to meet him.

Now for another battle—another conflict—another struggle, to which the only end that could be expected was the death of one of these mortal foes!

A glance showed the Burker that the Strangler had in his hands no other weapon than the lasso: a simultaneous glance made the Hindoo aware that the Englishman had no visible weapon but his club. Yet neither knew whether the other might not have a knife or dagger, or even a pistol, concealed about the person. With his club held up over his head—alike as a means of defence against the lasso, and to be in readiness to deal a terrific blow—the Burker rushed on to the combat. The Strangler stood firm, holding his cord in a peculiar manner; and as the Burker drew near, that lasso was thrown out with such sudden violence that the knot of the noose struck him upon the mouth. The blood gushed forth; and he was for an instant staggered:—but maddened with the pain, he made one bound towards his enemy. The Strangler darted aside, and gathered up his lasso with incredible rapidity for the purpose of using it again: but the Burker's club reached his left arm, as a blow was dealt with all the energy of the infuriate Englishman. That arm fell crushed and powerless by the Strangler's side: but the right hand again threw forth the lasso,—and again too with more or less effect. It struck the Burker in the middle of the forehead, with such violence as to make him reel even more than the former blow; and lightning appeared to gleam before his eyes. But again did he rush towards the Strangler, who however darted back; and the lasso was once more whistling through the air,—its noose this time being thrown at the Burker's neck. It was a marvel that he avoided it,—and yet he did. Then, at the same instant, he hurled his cudgel with all his might at the Strangler: it struck the Hindoo a tremendous blow upon the face; and the wretch toppled over the side of the rock, which in that direction was precipitous.

The Burker looked down into the abyss of about thirty feet in depth; and there he beheld the Strangler darting away: for, to the Englishman's astonishment, his opponent had evidently alighted on his feet. The lasso having fallen from the Strangler's hand, lay upon the top of the rock; and it was now evident that the Hindoo miscreant himself had experienced enough of the conflict for the present occasion. He was flying; and the Burker remained a victor upon the battle-ground.

At a very little distance a broad stream was rolling; and the thought struck the Burker that he would pursue his enemy and despatch him altogether. That river appeared to bar the Strangler's progress; for how could he swim across it with the use only of his right arm? And the stream made so sweeping a curve likewise, that if the Strangler followed its course along its bank, either to the right hand or to the left, it would bring him again in close proximity to the rock, which now seemed to serve as a fortalice commanding the entire position; so that the Burker conceived that he had only to sally down on either side, according to circumstances, and cut off the Strangler's retreat.

All these ideas passed through the Burker's mind during the space of the few moments in which the Strangler was fleeing towards the river. Straight he went, neither diverging to the right nor or the left!—straight to the centre of the arc formed by that bend of the stream! The weeds, the sedges, and the grass grew high upon the river's bank:—through that margining fringe rushed the Strangler, so that the Burker now became suddenly convinced that his foe did really intend to pass it by swimming, or by fording it—if it were indeed fordable. An imprecation burst from the Englishman's lips at the idea that the Hindoo would after all escape him!

But what is that dark object which suddenly appears amongst the weeds and sedges? The Strangler turns to retrace his way: that object is close behind him:—its whole form is now developed:—it is a tremendous alligator! The Hindoo no longer flies in a straight direction: he turns round and round, describing small circles, so as to avoid the long jaws of the unwieldy monster, which turns likewise. It is a scene of horrible excitement for the Burker, who beholds it all from the summit of that rock. For upwards of ten minutes does the spectacle, as strange as it is frightful, endure—the Strangler describing those circles which constitute the charm by which only is his life safe—the monster perseveringly turning and turning likewise, but unable to clutch the man in its vast gaping jaws. All in a moment the Strangler disappears from the Burker's view: he has either fallen

through giddiness, or terror, or exhaustion—or he has tripped over something. The alligator makes one forward movement—he lifts his head up—the Strangler is lying cross-wise in his jaws!

Horrible as this incident was, it only for the instant produced one effect upon the Burker—namely, that of a savage satisfaction to find that he was rid of his remaining enemy. Soon however the feeling stole over him that he himself might be destined to feed a maw as ravenous as that which had just devoured his treacherous foe; and again, for the thousandth time since he first became a wanderer amidst the wilds of that jungle, did a cold shudder sweep through his entire frame. His eyes were still riveted upon the river's bank; and he beheld the alligator plunge into the water.

The Burker now pursued his way. He walked rapidly; for he had collected all his energies for this last attempt to find an egress from the jungle. To his delight he found that his path became more easy—that he could proceed for long intervals without being compelled to plunge into thickets, or drag his feet through the rank luxuriance of herbage where reptiles might lurk. The high trees too were fewer and farther between; and remembering how insensibly as it were the jungle commenced, he began to flatter himself with the hope that it was now drawing to an end,—gradually losing its wildness and its horrors, as it merged into the cultivated parts of the country that lay beyond.

As he was proceeding, he suddenly beheld a human form at a little distance; and quickening his pace, he soon acquired the certainty that it was the surviving Gossoon who was toiling slowly along. Presently that itinerant looked round; and the Burker, with a heart leaping joyously, sped forward to join him: for there was no longer a doubt that he had at last reached the extremity of the jungle.

Welcome as is the sight of land to the storm-tossed mariner who without compass has been drifting hither and thither amidst the perils of the ocean,—was the spectacle which now greeted the Burker's view. For in the horizon he beheld the outlines of buildings; and all the interval between the verge of the jungle and that town was occupied by cultivated lands. Here and there, too, a cottage appeared; and the wanderer felt as if he were entering upon the confines of civilization once more. The Gossoon was waiting for him to come up. Be it remembered that this was the first of the three who had appeared at the cave,—the one whose inveterate habit of sleeping had so terribly irritated the Burker.

On approaching the Gossoon, the Englishman perceived that his countenance was haggard and careworn, and still had a frightened look as if the influence of horrors which had happened hours back yet remained upon his mind. The itinerant quickly descried the well-furnished wallet slung at the Burker's back; and the expression of his countenance suddenly changed from careworn haggardness to a selfish and rapacious satisfaction. He was about to make a spring at it, when the Burker, brandishing his club, menacingly made him a sign to keep off. The Gossoon laughed with a leer of low cunning, as much as to imply that the Burker felt he was now in a situation to command; and then assuming a lugubrious aspect, he imitated the bound of a tiger. The Burker comprehended what he meant—nodded his head—pointed to the wallet—and then made a motion as if picking up something from the ground—thereby showing how he had found that wallet on the spot where its recent possessor had fed the maw of the tiger. Then the squinting dervish in his turn made another sign—walked slowly on, imitating the gait of the emaciated old Gossoon—and all of a sudden halted, showing by rapid movements of his hand how the immense snake had darted forth upon that unfortunate comrade of his, and imitating likewise the wretch's writhings and convulsions when encircled by the folds of the serpent. The Burker nodded significantly, and made signs to show how he himself had seen the old Gossoon fast locked in the deadly coils of the boa constrictor. He likewise gave the Gossoon to understand that when he beheld the wretch, he was still alive and moaning plaintively. The dervish comprehended the Burker's meaning; and he gave vent to low half-subdued howls and moans of lamentation: but whether they were real or affected, it was impossible for the Burker to conjecture. At length the Gossoon made an end of his whining; and the Burker thought that he would now share his provisions with the itinerant, whom indeed he meant to make his companion; for moneyless as he was, he did not exactly see how he was to live without some such aid. As for any future prospects, the Burker really had none; for such was his position that he was forced to abandon himself entirely to chance.

The Gossoon seemed to treat with a sort of calm indifference the fact of the Burker producing the provisions from the wallet; and when they sat down together the itinerant began eating with a voracity that threatened to consume its contents altogether—or at least as much of them as he could secure for his own special behoof. The Burker made a sign for him to be sparing with the provisions: but the Gossoon pointed confidently in the direction of the town, as much as to imply that they could obtain an ample replenishment there. The Burker was well pleased with this tacit but perfectly intelligible announcement; and giving the rein to his appetite, he ate without farther parsimony in respect to the provender. The wallet was thus completely emptied.

The Gossoon now began making signs to intimate that the Burker should become his companion—a proposition which the ruffian received with so much veritable joy that it betrayed to the dervish his consciousness of how helpless he would be if left to himself. Thereupon the Gossoon nodded in a patronising manner, and seemed to be seeking to give him to understand that he would take him under his protection. But snatching up the Burker's cudgel, he hurled it to a distance; and then he made signs to show that he considered himself and the Englishman to be upon equal terms. The Burker growlingly muttered an imprecation: but remembering the evidence of superior strength which the Gossoon had given him at the cave, he thought it better to submit to these terms of equality on which the incident had just placed them.

The Gossoon now rose and pointed towards the town: the Burker, likewise rising to his feet, pre-

pared to accompany him. They journeyed on in silence; and the Englishman had thus ample leisure to give free scope to his reflections. Comparatively a few hours had sufficed to bring him from the cave to the extremity of the jungle: but on the former occasion of his endeavour to find an issue from the wilderness, he had taken another direction and had thus only floundered farther and farther into its depths. Whether he was still in the kingdom of Inderabad, he knew not: but he was very certain that when first entering the jungle after his flight from imprisonment in the capital city of that kingdom, he had not passed through the region where he now found himself. When in the jungle, and exposed to all its horrors, he would cheerfully have fallen in with any of Queen Indora's emissaries who might have been sent in pursuit of him: but now that he was clear beyond the limits of that awful wilderness, he entertained the precisely opposite feeling, and trembled at the thought of being recaptured and conducted back to Inderabad. Thus it was of some consequence to him to learn whether he was still within the range of Queen Indora's jurisdiction: but how could he possibly ascertain?—for no intelligible word could he exchange with the Gossoon. Trusting therefore to some fortuitous circumstance to impart the intelligence which he required, he walked on with his companion.

In about an hour and a half—as the sun was sinking into its western bed—they reached the outskirts of the town, which was one of moderate size. As they entered the streets, the Burker looked about to see if there were any English soldiers or Sepoys, such as he had seen in Calcutta and other places in Anglo-India through which he had passed when journeying as a prisoner in the suite of Queen Indora and her royal husband: but he beheld none of those indications of a British possession. The Gossoon led him on through

several streets, until they reached a small low building consisting of two rooms, and which was a sort of charitable institution where wayfarers might rest themselves and cook their rice without having anything to pay for the accommodation. There were several other Gossoons in this place, and to whom the Burker's companion was evidently well known. They had plenty of rice and other provisions, which they liberally shared with the new-comers. When the meal was over, the Burker's friend borrowed a few copper coins of the other Gossoons; and he then beckoned the Englishman to accompany him. They went out together, and proceeded to a shop where articles of cutlery were sold. Here the Gossoon purchased a couple of common rudely-constructed knives, the blades of which were fixed in the handles dagger-shaped; so that indeed they resembled oyster-knives. A piece of cork was stuck on each point; and the Gossoon, giving the Burker one, made a sign for him to secure it about his person. He then led the way back to the khan, or public accommodation-house; and there some of the other Gossoons produced opium and strong spirits. The Burker partook of the latter, but refused the former: his companion however regaled on both: and after a while the whole motley company stretched themselves to sleep on the benches in the inner room.

When the Burker awoke in the morning, he found that himself and his companion were the only two persons remaining in the place: the others had all gone forth on their respective avocations. No breakfast appeared to be forthcoming; and the Gossoon made a sign to the Burker to follow him. As they passed by a shop where comestibles were sold, the Gossoon pointed to the provisions, then to his own mouth and to that of the Burker—as much as to imply that some of that food should presently find its way into those avenues to the stomach. The Burker was cheered by this intimation; and he followed the Gossoon, wondering to what proceedings he was about to address himself in order to procure the means to purchase the inviting provender. Presently the Gossoon halted in a somewhat crowded thoroughfare; and placing his back against a dead wall, he made the Burker stand by his side. Then the Gossoon, taking forth his knife, signalled the Burker to do the same, but to draw off the cork from the point. The Burker, watching the proceedings of his leader, hid the knife up his sleeve; and the Gossoon began to appeal to the charity of the passers-by. At first it was in a whining tone of entreaty; then it was with howls and lamentations; and he kept nudging the Burker to imitate him. This the Englishman did to the best of his endeavour; and several persons—no doubt struck by the novelty of seeing an European in such a condition—stopped for a moment to contemplate him. But his was a countenance little calculated to excite sympathy: the townspeople therefore only shook their heads dubiously, and passed on their way.

The Gossoon, seeing how matters were going, bent a look of rage upon the Burker, as if to reproach him for the failure of their appeal to the public charity. Nothing could exceed the villanous expression of the dervish's countenance as his infuriate feelings thus convulsed his features; and his squinting eye darted forth vivid lightnings. The Burker was actually terrified by his companion's aspect; and he went on howling, yelling, and lamenting more vociferously than ever.

Still however the passers-by seemed incredulous in respect to the claims of the Gossoon and the Burker upon their charity; and thus about a couple of hours elapsed without a single coin being dropped into the outstretched hand of either. That period of the day was approaching when the streets would become deserted on account of the intense sultriness of the sun; and thus there appeared to be little chance, as matters now stood, for the Gossoon and the Burker to obtain the wherewith for the purchase of a breakfast. Yet the Gossoon had a resource left: but it was evidently one to which he only thought fit to address himself as a desperate alternative when the easier and more legitimate means of mendicity failed. He had his knife concealed in his sleeve: the Burker likewise had his weapon hidden up his own arm; and the Gossoon made him a sign to draw it forth. The Burker hesitated,—not understanding the object which the proceeding was to serve: but when he beheld the dervish draw forth his own knife, he followed the example. Then the Gossoon went on howling, roaring, and yelling more terrifically than ever,—the Burker doing his best to play his own part in the appalling chorus. All of a sudden the Gossoon made him a sign to cut himself with his knife; and tearing open his own sleeve, he drew the blade, as if in perfect frenzy, along his arm. The Burker, by no means relishing the frantic example thus set him by the Gossoon, muttered something in his special vernacular to the effect that he would see himself in the hottest place he could possibly think of before he would stick a knife into his own flesh. Quick as lightning, however, the Gossoon tore up the Burker's sleeve, and stuck his knife into the fleshy part of the man's arm. The Burker, roaring with the pain, was on the very point of inflicting summary chastisement on the Gossoon by plunging the knife into his heart,—when a quantity of coins showered down upon them from the windows of the opposite houses. Several of the passers-by, on seeing the blood of the two mendicants thus flowing, quickly bestowed their alms; and thus the Burker's rage was somewhat appeased. The money thrown from the windows was speedily gathered up; and the Gossoon, beckoning the Burker to follow, hurried away.

In a few minutes they stopped in a secluded place; and the Gossoon, producing a small pot of ointment, applied some of it to his own arm, and then to the Burker's. Having done this, he produced bandages likewise; and having made the Burker twist one round his arm, he proceeded to perform the same good office for that individual. The Burker could not however help perceiving that whereas the Gossoon had inflicted upon himself a comparatively trifling scratch, he had dealt far less considerately when plunging his knife into the arm of his comrade. But as the Burker now felt no pain since the application of the ointment, and as the bandage had stanched the blood, he suffered himself to be appeased by the prospect of a good meal—for he was ravenously hungry.

The Gossoon led the way to that comestible

shop which they had previously passed; and there he purchased an ample supply of provender. At another shop he procured a quantity of spirits; and thence he conducted the Burker to the khan, or accommodation-house, where they had passed the night. Here several other Gossoons were already assembled, — some devouring the food which they had procured with their morning's mendicity,—others engaged in boiling their rice preparatory for their own meal. It did not however appear that any of them had achieved so much success as the squinting Gossoon and the Burker, judging by the nature and quantity of the provisions that were displayed. While these two were eating and drinking, the other Gossoons laughed and chatted amongst themselves; and the Burker's companion, presently joining in the discourse, soon made all the other Gossoons burst into uproarious peals of laughter. At first the Burker was at a loss to comprehend the cause of this merriment; but when his companion pointed to the man's wounded arm, the latter became terribly irritated; and he bent a diabolically vindictive look on his comrade. The dervish thereupon jumped up from his seat, pointed to the doorway, and made signs to intimate that the Burker was quite at liberty to shift for himself if he thought fit. The Englishman gave a savage growl; and resigning himself to his destiny, went on eating and drinking without taking any further notice of his comrade or the other Gossoons.

CHAPTER CLIX.

TORTURES.

Ten days elapsed, during which the Burker remained in the companionship of the squinting Gossoon; and they wandered from one town to another. They were tolerably successful in their appeals to public charity; and during this interval it was not again found necessary to have recourse to the knives in order to awaken sympathy. The Burker ate and drank of the best: a couple of hours each day were generally sufficient to procure the requisite coin for the purchase of this food; and the houses of public accommodation afforded the wanderers a resting-place for the night. The Burker began to learn a few of the commonest words in the native language of his companion; and he thought that his present kind of life was not so very disagreeable after all.

He soon perceived the motive by which the Gossoon was influenced in making him his companion. It was tolerably evident that public sympathy was pretty well exhausted in respect to the tribe of mendicant dervishes: but the spectacle of an European in apparent distress gave an impulse to flagging charity. The Burker thus comprehended that it was more on his own account than for the Gossoon's sake, that alms poured in upon them: but the dervish himself endeavoured by all kinds of manœuvrings and stratagems to prevent this impression from taking a hold on the Englishman's mind. The Burker was however too shrewd not to fathom the truth; and he accordingly began to think that it would be better for his own interests if he were to dissolve the partnership of mendicity with the Gossoon. His resolution to this effect was taken; and he now only awaited an opportunity to carry it out.

One morning—at the expiration of that interval we have noticed at the beginning of this chapter—the Gossoon and the Burker reached a town of larger dimensions than any of those which they had as yet visited in company; and the dervish gave his comrade to understand that they would here reap a considerable harvest. Scarcely however had they entered the suburbs, when they were seized upon by half-a-dozen Peons, or native policemen, who seemed disposed to handle them roughly. The Gossoon, setting up a hideous howling, drew forth his knife, and was preparing to attack his captors, when he was knocked down by a severe blow; and the weapon was wrested from him. The Burker was then searched; and his knife was likewise taken away: but he escaped any particular ill-treatment on account of offering no resistance. The two prisoners were then conducted hurriedly along the streets; and they were thus led to a large gloomy-looking building, which the Burker fancied to be a prison. It however proved to be no house of permanent detention at all: for the building contained one large room—and though not a gaol, it was nevertheless a scene of terrific horrors.

There were about twenty persons seated upon a long bench against one of the walls of this room, the door of which was guarded by several Peons. The Burker and the Gossoon were conducted to the bench; and there they sat down amidst the other captives. With the exception of the Burker himself, all these prisoners were natives, belonging to different castes; and there were several females amongst them. These were weeping bitterly, while several of the men were howling, yelling, and wailing, all as if in anticipation of some terrible chastisement which they would shortly have to endure. There were however three or four men, evidently of a somewhat superior class, who maintained a dignified silence, and who had the air of innocent victims courageously resigning themselves to the pressure of some strong tyranny against which there was no appeal.

Upon a table in the middle of the room lay several articles of a miscellaneous character. There were whips and sticks, necklaces made of bones, hammers and nails, several brickbats, small iron rods with wooden handles, coils of rope, cocoa-nut shells, and little boxes the contents of which the Burker could not conjecture. As he glanced along the line of captives upon the bench, he perceived that many of them kept flinging frighted and shuddering glances towards this table; so that at length the idea stole into the man's mind that the punishment to be expected was associated with the objects so ominously spread upon that board.

Presently a superior officer of the Peons entered the room; and he made an imperious sign for the howlings, the lamentations, and the wailings to be hushed. To a certain extent he was obeyed: for the captives doubtless thought that their punishment would be meted—or rather mitigated, according to the degree of submissiveness they displayed. Some of the women however continued to weep with a bitterness which they were evidently unable to restrain.

The suspenseful curiosity of the Burker was at length about to be assuaged—but in a manner as horrible as if when suffering from a burning thirst, the most noxious fluid was poured down his throat. A couple of the Peons seized upon the Burker's comrade; and the wretched Gossoon began to address them in a strain of the most piteous appeal. To these entreaties however they were not merely inaccessible, but with their clenched fists they dealt him some severe blows over the head in order to compel him to hold his peace. They then stretched him upon the floor; and one of the Peons proceeded to administer a terrible fustigation with a large whip which he took from the table. The Gossoon howled hideously: but the more he yelled, the heavier fell the blows, —until at length the Peon desisted from sheer exhaustion. The Gossoon was then lifted up and forcibly expelled from the place.

One of the dignified-looking natives was now seized upon; and in silence did he submit to the torture he was about to undergo. In the first place the Peons twisted his ears with most merciless brutality; and though the victim writhed with the pain, yet did not a sound escape his lips. He was then made to kneel upon the floor; and a brick was placed in the bend of each leg, just within the knee-joint. A cord was then fastened round his waist; the extremities were fixed to his ankles; and his form was thus drawn down until the haunches rested upon the heels. When it is remembered that the bricks were inserted behind the knee-joints, the excruciating agony of this position can be fully comprehended. There the man was left in the middle of the room; and another victim was now seized upon. This was also one of the dignified individuals who had maintained a profound silence; and the Peons, taking a couple of the sticks from the table, tied them together at one end. The man's hands were now introduced between the two sticks—which were tightened over them and made to cross each other at the unfastened ends; so that the compression upon the hands was productive of a most hideous torture. The unfortunate victim bore it heroically, and in silence, for some minutes—until at length a low moan escaped his lips, and he sank down senseless. A couple of the females were now seized upon by the Peons; and despite their piteous entreaties, the barbaric torture was applied. Their hands were likewise crushed between a couple of sticks; and this process, we may observe, is known in India by the name of the *kittee*. The piercing screams of the victims thrilled through the apartment; and when they seemed about to faint with excess of agony, the sticks were removed from their hands. But their punishment was not over; for the Peons proceeded to tie the two females together by the long tresses of their back hair. With ruthless hands did the torturers fasten those knots so tightly as to cause the most terrible pain to the victims; and thus united, they were left, sitting back to back, on the floor.

There was an elderly female, well-dressed, and of most respectable appearance, who was seated in the midst of the captives on the bench. One of the Peons now approached her—threw over her neck a chain made of bones—and spat in her face; while another Peon took a stick and dealt her several severe blows over the shoulders. They then left her with the chain of bones round her neck—this punishment being one of the most degrading and derogatory that could be possibly inflicted on a native female of a respectable caste.

Another male victim was now seized upon; and to him was applied the torture known as the *anundal*. Being placed against the wall, he was compelled to stand upon one leg; and a cord being fastened round his neck, the extremity was tied by means of a thin string to the great toe of the upraised leg; and in this condition the wretched being was left. Another male victim was thrown upon the floor; a cord was likewise fastened round his neck; and the extremities were tied to his feet, —the head being drawn down till it rested on the knees. Then a large stone was placed upon his back; and in this position he also was left. A cord was now passed through a pulley attached to the ceiling: one extremity was fastened to the long flowing hair of a female; and the other was tied to a ring in the wall—the cord being drawn just so tight as to compel the miserable victim to remain standing on the points of her toes. Next a brazier was brought in: some of the iron rods were placed in the burning charcoal; and when red hot, these searing irons were applied to the bare arms or legs of other victims.

But now a still more exquisite process of torture was about to meet the horrified view of the Burker. A handsome young woman was to become its victim; and heartrending were her shrieks when by the preparations she comprehended what she had to endure. Being compelled to kneel upon the ground, she was stripped to the waist; and when her natural modesty prompted her to cross her arms over her bosom, the Peons brutally drew those arms away, and fastened them by the wrists behind her back. A Peon then took up the half of a cocoa-nut shell; and opening one of the little boxes upon the table, he dexterously shifted into that shell several insects which the box contained. These insects were of the species known as the carpenter-beetle, which are accustomed to bite with a stinging sensation infinitely more severe than the pain inflicted by an English wasp. Amidst the rending shrieks of the unfortunate young woman, the cocoa-nut shell was applied to one of her breasts, a Peon holding it there, and two others of these miscreant torturers holding the victim herself so tightly and steadily as to prevent her from shaking off the shell by the convulsions of her excruciated form. Her screams were horrible to a degree; and it was not until she fainted that the torture was considered sufficient.

A beautiful young woman was the next victim. She was most respectably attired: her bearing in every sense indicated her to be a female of unimpeachable modesty; and in addition to a handsome countenance, she possessed a perfect symmetry of shape. When the executioners approached her, she threw herself upon her knees, stretching forth her clasped hands in agonizing appeal—but all in vain. She was stretched upon the bench, and a cloth was stuffed into her mouth to drown her cries. The Peons, ruthlessly tearing off her garments, stripped her to the waist; and a magnificent bust was then revealed. It was no doubt on account of the superb contours of her bosom, she was chosen for the particular torture which was now to be adopted. Firm, rounded, and admira-

bly shaped, as if it were of statuary marble, was this young female's bust; and to each bosom was the *kittee* applied. The sticks, fastened two and two at each extremity, and formed of a wood just sufficiently supple to inflict the torture without breaking, were made to encircle and tighten round each breast as if securing those glowing orbs in a vice. The agony was terrific—and all the more so inasmuch as there was no vent for it through the portals of the lips,—the suffocating cloth hushing the shrieks and screams that must have arisen as it were up into the very throat. The compressure of the bosom between the accursed sticks was continued with unrelenting ferocity, until the torturers fancied that the victim had fainted: but life itself was extinct. She was a corpse! There however the wretches let her lie.

Several other species of torture were next administered to other victims. One was fastened to the wall, with a nail driven through his ear, in such a manner that he was compelled to keep standing upon the points of his toes. A donkey was led into the room; and the hair of another victim was tied to the animal's tail. The brute was then lashed with a whip; and it dragged the man rapidly through the open door into the streets,—his cries and yells of agony reverberating through the place. At length every one of the captives had undergone some species of horrible chastisement, with the exception of the Burker. For nearly three hours had the proceedings now lasted; and the wretch had been compelled to sit gazing upon the sufferings of his fellow-prisoners. Every instant he had shudderingly wondered when his turn would come, and which special torture would be allotted to himself. It seemed however as if there were an intention either to reserve him to the last, or to pass him over altogether: and the man earnestly hoped that this latter alternative would prove to be the case.

The officer of the Peons now approached him, saying in tolerably good English, "You are an European?—perhaps an Englishman?"

The Burker replied in the affirmative, and besought mercy.

"Take yourself off, then!" responded the officer; "and beware how you are again found in the company of any of those lazy vagabond impostors who prowl about the country and impose upon the charitable. Depart!"

The Burker did not require to be again bidden to quit that scene of horrors; and he hastened away.

We must here pause to assure the reader that we have dealt not in the slightest exaggeration while endeavouring to describe the process of diabolical tortures to which the natives of India are not merely liable, but to which they are often subjected. Perhaps it may be supposed that scenes of this description occur only in the domains of independent Princes: but the very reverse is the fact,—for they occur *only* in that part of India which groans beneath the tyranny of British rule. The object is to enforce the payment of the oppressive taxes which the Anglo-Indian Government levies upon the native population,—chiefly upon the landowners. India swarms with the collectors: and these harpies possess power to punish defaulters. The collectors themselves are for the most part of unprincipled character; and they conceal their own peculations, or administer to their extravagances, by compelling the natives to pay the same tax two or three times over. If a landowner should oppose their tyranny, he is seized upon and tortured: or if he hide himself, or undertake a journey in order to escape the importunity of the collector when visiting his district, his wife or his daughter may be rendered a victim in his place,—as was the case with those females whose sufferings we have just described. Moreover, in many towns of Anglo-India, mendicants and vagrants are subjected to the torture; and the license to use it being accorded to the local authorities, is frightfully abused. If a tax-collector or an officer of Peons should chance to cast his eyes upon a handsome female, woe to her unless she surrender herself into the miscreant's arms! It is no vain threat which he holds forth to take her to the torture-chamber; and he will ruthlessly stand by to contemplate the maiming or mutilation, the crushing or the laceration of the charms which in the first instance fired his passion.

Yes — reader, torture exists in India under British rule! — torture is inflicted by the officials of the Anglo-Indian Government! Countless sums are subscribed annually at Exeter Hall and elsewhere to furnish the means for missionaries to carry the Gospel amongst the "benighted heathens and pagans" of that Oriental clime: but who of those missionaries has ever returned to England to raise an indignant voice against the infliction of the torture upon the poor Hindoos? A pretty opinion must those unfortunates have of the nation to which belong the missionaries who would convert them; and a fine notion must they entertain of that religion which seeks to proselytise them. Of the full amount of horrors committed by British rule in Hindostan, the masses of our people have but a faint idea: but we solemnly assure them that no single detail of the above given description of the torture-chamber in India is in any way exaggerated.

We now resume the thread of our narrative. The Burker, on emerging from the midst of that scene of horrors, sped through the streets, anxious to escape as soon as possible from a town where vagrancy was so frightfully punished. He beheld not the Gossoon—nor did he indeed take any trouble to look for him: he was glad to have got rid of such a dangerous companionship. Issuing from the town in the contrary direction from that by which he had entered it, the Burker proceeded at random across the open country, until the sultriness of the sun at length compelled him to seek the refreshing shade of some trees: for since quitting the jungle he experienced no apprehension on reposing himself beneath such umbrageous canopies. He soon fell fast asleep: his slumber lasted for several hours; and when he awoke, it was with a gnawing sensation of hunger in his stomach.

But, Ah! who was this that was seated on the grass near him? It was his late companion, the squint-eyed Gossoon, who appeared to have been patiently waiting until the Burker should arouse himself. For a moment an expression of annoyance passed over the Englishman's features: but his looks as well as his mood speedily changed when the Gossoon emptied upon the grass the contents of his wallet. The fare thus furnished was good; and the Gossoon grinned with a mali-

cious triumph as he perceived the aspect of vexation flit away from the Burker's countenance. They both commenced an attack upon the provender, which they washed down with a quantity of spirits from the flask that the wallet likewise contained.

When the meal was over, the Gossoon made dolorous signs to indicate the sufferings he had endured in the torture-chamber; and he seemed anxious to know with what nature and degree of punishment the Burker himself had got off. The Englishman quickly gave him to understand that he had escaped scot free: whereat the Gossoon regarded him with the most unfeigned astonishment. Recourse being had once more to the contents of the flask, the Gossoon made a sign that they should continue their way. The Burker could not help keeping in the man's company again, at least for the present: but he nevertheless resolved to separate from him as soon as possible; for the warning of the officer of the Peons rang in his ears, and the spectacle of the torture-chamber was vividly present to his memory. He had ascertained beyond the possibility of doubt, from the presence of those Peons at the town he had so recently left, that he was now upon the soil of the British possessions; and he was therefore relieved from the dread of being apprehended by any of Queen Indora's emissaries.

The Gossoon and the Burker continued their way until the sun was low in the western horizon; and the Englishman, being well wearied, made a sign to his companion that they must soon think of finding a place for repose. The Gossoon himself was much fatigued; and he seemed uncertain which direction to take. He stopped and looked about him,—until at length descrying a house at a distance, he pointed thither. Towards that house the two men accordingly proceeded; and as they drew near the dwelling, the Burker saw that it was a farm-house. On reaching it, the Gossoon did not immediately proceed to the front door: but a side window being open, he peeped in. The Burker looked over his shoulder: and they both beheld an elderly man—a Hindoo native of the Ryot or land-holding class, counting his money at a table. He was alone in that room; and so intent was he in the counting of his rupees, that he evidently suspected not the presence of the witnesses at the window. The Gossoon flung upon the Burker a look of mysterious significancy, which the latter could not rightly comprehend; and then the dervish hastily led his English companion towards the front door.

There the Gossoon commenced the usual whine with which persons of his profession solicit charity in India; and in a few moments the elderly Ryot made his appearance. Nothing could exceed the fawning humility of the Gossoon's demeanour,—which the Burker imitated as well as he could. The Ryot was astonished to see an European in the vagrant companionship of a dervish; and the Gossoon immediately proceeded to give voluble utterance to some tale, of which the Burker was evidently the hero. That this tale was replete with woes and sufferings, as well as injuries and wrongs sustained, was likewise evident: for the elderly Ryot contemplated the Burker with an increasing degree of interest; and when the Gossoon had ceased speaking, the hospitable master of the homestead invited them both to enter. He set food before them: they ate and drank; and when they had finished their meal, the Ryot conducted them to a little back room where he meant them to repose for the night.

The sun had by this time set, and the room was involved in almost complete darkness: but scarcely had the hospitable Ryot retired, when the Gossoon nudged the Burker and gave him to understand that he was not to go to sleep. It now occurred to the Englishman that the Gossoon was contemplating some bold or stealthy step in respect to the Ryot's money: for he remembered the significant look which the dervish had bent upon him ere they had retired from the window of the landowner's private room. In a few minutes they heard the front door of the house open; and then there were the sounds of three or four voices in conversation together in a neighbouring apartment. It was evident that some of the Ryot's family, or else his domestics, had returned from their occupations on the farm. The Burker was wondering whether this circumstance would alter the Gossoon's plan, whatever it were,—when that individual gave him another significant nudge; so that the Englishman felt convinced his comrade entertained his original intention.

They sat in silence in their little room for about an hour and a half,—when they heard footsteps moving about the house, followed by the closing of different doors; so that they knew the family was retiring to rest. Another hour passed in total silence,—the Gossoon however occasionally nudging his companion, as if to bid him keep awake. At length the dervish seemed to think the moment was come for the execution of his project; and he slowly opened the door. There was a passage with which other rooms communicated; and sufficient light streamed through a small window to show the two men where the doors of those apartments were situated. The Gossoon comprehended the geography of the place better than the Burker; and he proceeded slowly and cautiously to open a door on the left hand side of the passage. There also the light streamed in from the starlit heavens; and the Gossoon, having first looked carefully into the chamber, beckoned the Burker to follow him. The hospitable Ryot was sleeping there. The Gossoon crept towards the couch; and just as he reached it, the Ryot started up. But the Gossoon flew at him as if he had for the nonce borrowed a tiger's power and agility; and his hands clutched the unfortunate man's throat. No cry escaped the Ryot's lips—no sound but a suffocating gasping gurgle: but for an instant there was a violent struggle between the two, until the Burker threw himself upon the Ryot's form and held him down. The horrible process of murder lasted not then many minutes. The deed was accomplished: the individual who had afforded such generous hospitality to the two miscreants, lay a corpse in his bed. The Gossoon had proved himself as ruthless and merciless an assassin as even the Burker was in his own native clime!

When the tragedy was accomplished, the two men listened for a few moments: but all was silent. They then began ransacking the furniture and boxes in the room; and after some little difficulty they discovered the place where their victim

had concealed his hoarded rupees. These were contained in two bags, which seemed to be of tolerably equal weight and dimensions: the Gossoon accordingly took one—the Burker the other. They then issued from the chamber of death by means of that window through which they had first become acquainted with the fact that the Ryot posssessed the coin that proved the temptation to commit this heinous crime.

But it seemed as if the Gossoon were not contented with what he had done: or at all events he thought that another crime must be perpetrated to conceal the first one. There was an immense quantity of rice-straw in the immediate vicinity of the dwelling; and by the means of ignition which the Gossoon always carried about with him, he set fire to the stack. The flame blazed up,—almost immediately seizing upon the house itself, which was built of combustible materials; and away sped the incendiary, closely followed by the Burker. The latter could not help thinking that the crime was a bold one altogether, though he had no remorse on its account; but he fancied that if the other inmates of the house should escape from the conflagration, the murder and the robbery might possibly be discovered; and they could scarcely fail to know that the Ryot had awarded his hospitality to two men who would be missing. However, the triple turpitude of murder, robbery, and arson was consummated: it was too late to recall either of the foul deeds; and the Burker thought within himself that the Gossoon must have had excellent reasons for superadding the last crime to the two former.

On they went together, and every now and then as they looked back, they beheld the tremendous conflagration; but the Burker could distinguish no persons moving about in the vicinage of the flames. At length a grove hid the burning scene from the view of the criminals; and they reached a cave, where they passed the remainder of the night. At dawn they resumed their journey; and the Gossoon was now careful to avoid towns or large villages. They procured refreshments at isolated cottages, either through charity or by paying for their food; but they were equally careful not to display the large sums of money which they possessed.

Ten days passed after the terrible crimes which we have just recorded; and many a long mile had the criminals journeyed together, thus continuously increasing the interval between themselves and the scene of their turpitude. At length the Gossoon evidently thought that they were completely safe; and they entered a small town which they now reached. Here they purchased a quantity of excellent provisions; and some article which they thus bought, was wrapped up by the shopkeeper in a piece of a newspaper. On reaching the khan, where they purposed to pass the night, the Burker happening to look at the fragment of newspaper, discovered that it was printed in the English language. It was one of the small local journals which are issued in that tongue in India. While eating his supper, the Burker looked over its contents,—until his attention was riveted to a paragraph, headed "Terrible fire and loss of life."

He read the paragraph; and he found that it related to the very deed of blackest turpitude which himself and the Gossoon had perpetrated. It appeared (according to the journal) that every soul in the house had perished in the flames, which had spread with such rapidity that there was no possibility of escape. A wandering Gossoon and some European of a very low description were reported to have perished at the same time,—the particulars of the conflagration having been furnished by two labouring men who had partaken of supper at the house, but had afterwards quitted it to retire to the cottage which they inhabited at a little distance. The Burker now comprehended why the Gossoon had set fire to the premises. With a devilish shrewdness he had foreseen this catastrophe: or at all events he had thought it was worth while to perpetrate this last crime with the chance that it would conceal the previous ones.

The Englishman pointed to the newspaper; and partly by signs, partly by aid of the few words of Hindostanee he had picked up, he made the dervish comprehend the nature of its contents. A diabolical satisfaction was expressed on the Hindoo's countenance; and the Burker could not help regarding the Gossoon as a villain endowed with a boldness and a shrewdness well calculated to win any other villain's admiration.

The meal of which they partook was a copious one; and they washed it down with proportionate quantities of alcoholic fluid. It happened that they were alone together in the khan; and they were likewise alone when they lay down to rest. The Burker was more than half intoxicated with the liquor he had imbibed; and he slept most soundly. The sun had risen some time when he awoke; and he immediately missed the Gossoon. An idea of treachery flashed through his brain: he thrust his hands beneath his garments; and a terrible imprecation burst from his lips as he discovered that his bag of money was gone. He looked about him in the last wild faint hope that it might have slipped out from his buttoned-up coat while he was slumbering: but no—it had vanished! Nothing could exceed the rage of the Burker. It was only the night before that he had resolved upon playing the Gossoon precisely the same trick: but he was foiled—he was baffled—he was forestalled. Oh! if he could only fall in with the squinting villain, what a terrible vengeance would he wreak upon him! From the very first moment he met that Gossoon at the cave in the jungle, he had hated him: he had continued to hate him throughout the three weeks of their wandering companionship; and now this hatred expanded into a craving for the direst vengeance.

CHAPTER CLX.

THE RUINED TEMPLE.

ONCE more did the Burker find himself a moneyless outcast in a strange land. He had not even a morsel of food to put between his lips; for the Gossoon had carried off the wallet which contained the remnant of the provender purchased on the preceding evening. Hungry and miserable—almost as desponding and as despairing as he had ever been even when in the depths of the hideous jungle — the Englishman went forth from the

khan. He had some idea of playing the part of howling mendicant by himself: but beholding a couple of Peons proceeding through the street, he thought of the tortures—and he quitted the town.

For several hours he wandered through the country, reckless in which direction he proceeded—having no fixed aim—but wondering what would become of himself. At length he reached a pile of ruins, which seemed to be the remains of some ancient temple. He remembered the ruined temple he had seen in the jungle; and his blood ran cold at the recollection of how he had there beheld snakes coiling all over the black marble image. He therefore hesitated to enter amidst these ruins,—although the beams of the meridian sun were pouring down with all their burning heat upon him. He was faint and exhausted with hunger, with weariness, and with the intolerable sultriness of the day: he therefore at last mustered up courage sufficient to penetrate into the ruins.

Amidst huge blocks of granite did the Englishman work his way—over prostrate pillars and crumbling columns did he step—until he at length found himself inside as much as remained of the edifice itself. He perceived one large image upon a pedestal, and another lying amidst the rank grass which grew where a pavement of stone or marble once had been.

As he was proceeding cautiously, the Burker's foot kicked against something amidst the grass; and it being of a very hard substance, he had no fear that it was any coiled-up reptile. He stooped down, and felt about upon the spot:—his hand encountered an iron ring fastened to the middle of a stone about two feet square. Thinking that the circumstance was worth while to be further investigated—and having ideas of buried treasures floating through his mind—the Englishman began to remove the long grass which grew all about the stone; and when he had torn up the rank herbage by the roots, he found that the stone was set in the midst of surrounding pavement, upon which a surface of earth had accumulated sufficient to produce and nourish the grass which he had thus cleared. He now endeavoured to raise the stone: but vain were his attempts. Exhausted thereby, he desisted—and began to console himself for his failure in a fashion somewhat similar to that of the fox with respect to the grapes in the fable. He muttered between his lips that the stone with the ring doubtless covered the mouth of a well, and that any idea of a buried treasure was idle and ridiculous.

The exceeding sultriness of the sun compelled the Burker to remain within the shade afforded by the ruined temple. He was faint with hunger and parched with thirst: he resolved at the approach of evening to quit his present quarters, and appeal to the charity of some dweller at any neighbouring cottage for food and a night's rest. Perhaps through the man's mind floated the idea of enriching himself once more by means similar to those which had temporarily put him in possession of a bag of rupees: for crime is horribly suggestive, even on the part of those who by their own misdeeds would appear to stand in need of no such hints at all.

In a short time the thirst of the Burker grew so intolerable that he was compelled to issue forth from the ruined temple in the hope of finding some neighbouring spring. But scarcely had he advanced a dozen yards from the dilapidated edifice, when he beheld the unmistakable form of the squint-eyed Gossoon approaching. It was with a sudden yell of rage that the Burker bounded towards his late companion: but the latter, with a malignant grin, drew forth a sharp poniard from beneath his garments; and holding its point towards the Burker, seemed to say, "Come on if you dare!"

The Englishman stopped short, scowling horribly: the Gossoon burst out into a laugh, which only irritated the Englishman more than ever, if possible, against him; so that at all risks he was on the very point of springing at the treacherous dervish, when this individual suddenly tossed his wallet towards him. The Burker picked it up; and as he opened it, his hand first of all encountered a flask. This he at once applied to his lips; and the potent alcohol he imbibed tended to appease his rage somewhat and improve his humour. He glanced at the Gossoon, who was now grinning, nodding, and wagging his head, and squinting more horribly than ever with his right eye.

The wallet contained some tempting provisions; and the Burker was already commencing a ravenous attack upon them, when the Gossoon spoke something and made him a sign to repair to the ruins of the temple. The Burker hesitated and looked suspicious: but the Hindoo replaced his dagger beneath his garments, and made signs of amity and peace. The Burker thought that after all the Gossoon could entertain no murderous intention towards him; for if so, he might have already carried it into effect while he was inspecting the wallet; and therefore he no longer hesitated to return into the temple. There they sat down together, eating and drinking just as if their companionship had never once been interrupted by the perfidy of the Hindoo; and when the meal was concluded, the Gossoon rose and began to examine the interior of the ruins, evidently with the air of a man who beheld them for the first time. The Burker meanwhile was wondering whether his companion still had the bags of rupees about him; and if so, how he could turn the tables and become the despoiler. All of a sudden an ejaculation escaped the lips of the dervish:—he had discovered the stone with the iron ring!

The Burker now approached the spot; and partly by signs, partly by means of the few words of Hindostance with which he was acquainted, he gave the Gossoon to understand that it was he himself who had torn up the grass, but that he had vainly endeavoured to lift the stone. The Gossoon attempted the task; but appeared equally unable to perform it. He then took his dagger, and with the point endeavoured to work away the cement which united the stone to the surrounding ones. While he was thus occupied, an idea entered into the Burker's head. He thought that he might seize the opportunity of gratifying his vengeance, and recovering possession of his bag of rupees, with the Gossoon's treasure likewise, all at the same time. His eye settled upon a fragment of masonry which lay conveniently near, and which was of dimensions suitable to be wielded for his murderous purpose,—when the Gossoon, suddenly starting up from the work in

which he had been engaged, bent upon the Englishman a ferocious look, as if by some extraordinary intuition he had read what was passing in his mind. The Burker scowled in order to veil his confusion; for he recollected that the Gossoon had in every sense the advantage of him—being armed with a weapon, and being physically stronger, as he had proven at the cave in the jungle.

All in a moment the Hindoo's appearance changed: he smiled and nodded in the most amicable manner, giving utterance to words which the Burker comprehended were to the effect that they should thenceforth be friends again. He drew forth the stolen bag of rupees from amidst his garments, and tossed the treasure to the Burker. This was a proof of amicable intentions; and the Englishman was rejoiced to regain possession of his portion of the wealth that had been procured by a share in the crime. It struck him that the Gossoon entertained the hope that he stood upon the threshold of some important discovery in respect to the stone with the ring—and that he felt he could not well act without the assistance or the services of the Burker—and hence his change of demeanour towards him. Again did ideas of a buried treasure troop through the Englishman's mind; and willing to enter into a renewed partnership with the Gossoon, he proffered his hand. The Hindoo took it: the flask was produced from the wallet; and they appeared to vow mutual friendship, each in a dram of the potent spirits.

The Gossoon, now abandoning the process of picking away the mortar—which seemed an interminable one, for it was nearly as hard as the stones which it cemented together—examined the ring with a scrutinizing attention. Presently he began to work the ring about in different ways, and to endeavour to turn it round. In this he at

length succeeded; and with but little difficulty he moved the stone—or rather, we should say, not merely the one which contained the ring, but the surrounding smaller ones to which it was joined. Instead of opening like a trap-door, the mass of masonry rolled aside, disclosing an aperture large enough for a stout person to pass through. An ejaculation of joy burst from the Gossoon's lips; and the Burker was now full of excited curiosity and suspense.

The stone covering of the aperture was fixed by rings, on its underneath part, to two iron bars running horizontal and parallel three or four inches below the aperture; so that the masonry could not be raised, but it slid with comparative ease sideways, when the spring which retained it fast was acted upon by the turning of the iron ring. There was a flight of stone steps leading down into utter darkness: nor was it possible to conjecture to what depth the abyss descended. The Gossoon collected together a quantity of dry branches and leaves from some trees in the immediate vicinage of the temple; and making a loose faggot, he set fire to these combustible materials. He threw the blazing torch into the subterranean; and the glare was sufficient to show that it was a room, or cavern, of about ten feet in depth, to which the steps led down.

The Gossoon rubbed his hands, laughed gleefully, and gave every evidence of his conviction that some discovery most important to himself and his companion was about to be made. He then proceeded to manufacture three or four torches; and when this task was accomplished, he signalled the Burker to descend into the cavern for the purposes of research. But the Englishman, terribly suspicious of perfidy, shook his head, and intimated that it was the Gossoon who ought to be the first to descend. The Hindoo, thinking that his companion required some fresh proof of his sincerity towards him, drew forth his poignard, snapped the blade in halves, and tossed the fragments amidst the ruins. The Burker now thought that he need no longer hesitate: but still he made a sign for the Gossoon to follow him. The Hindoo assented: two torches were lighted; and the Burker, carrying one, began the descent of the stone steps. The Hindoo, carrying the other, was close behind him.

They found themselves, as they expected, in a small room of about the depth which we have already specified; and it was probably eight feet square, by six in width. Along one of the walls several small vases were ranged; and on the lids of these being lifted off, they were found to be filled with coins, but so discoloured as to afford the idea at first that they were all of copper or even of a baser metal. But the dervish, with another ejaculation of joy, rang a few of them on the paved floor, bit them with his teeth, and proved them to be silver. He then danced in the gleefulness of his mood; and the Burker was likewise so overjoyed that he forgot all his past enmity and hatred towards the man through whose instrumentality this colossal treasure was discovered.

Some minutes elapsed before the Gossoon could so far regain his composure as to reflect upon the course which was next to be adopted. Nor did it appear as if he were very well able to make up his mind in a hurry: for he signalled to the Burker that they should quit the cavern for the present. The Englishman now once again abandoned himself to the guidance of the Gossoon; and he offered no objection when that individual began to lead the way up the stone steps. They had each lighted a second torch: but these were already burnt so low as to last but for a minute or two longer.

The Gossoon, as we have said, began to lead the way up the steps, the Burker following. But all in a moment it struck the latter that the Hindoo was hastening up with a suspicious quickness; and an idea of treachery flashed through the Englishman's mind. The Gossoon sprang out of the aperture; and the next instant the Burker, to his horror, beheld the masonry gliding over him. With a cry, or rather yell, at the hideous thought of being buried alive in that tomb, he thrust up his right hand, which held the fragment of the blazing torch; and it came in contact with the Gossoon's hand, which was upon the ring of the central stone. A howl of agony burst from the Hindoo as the blazing faggot broke all over his flesh: his hand quitted its hold on the ring: the Burker rolled back the masonry, and leaped forth from the subterranean.

Now these two men stood facing each other with aspects of fierce and malignant defiance. The Gossoon's treachery was but too well understood by the Burker; for the perfidious Hindoo had intended to accomplish his death by starvation or suffocation in the subterranean, so that he might possess himself of the whole of the treasure. The Burker could no more repose the slightest confidence in him: the Gossoon evidently felt this; and thus the two men stood confronting each other, as if with the mutual conviction that one must now die in order for the survivor to be safe. Both were unarmed, and each seemed fearful of commencing the attack. The Gossoon had not the same confidence in himself as when he suddenly pounced upon the Burker and hurled him down at the cave in the jungle. Perhaps he knew that he had then merely taken him by surprise, and that by sheer agility he had performed a feat for a repetition of which he could not hope, now that his opponent stood entirely upon his guard. On the other hand the Englishman was equally reluctant to be the first to close in the death-struggle, for fear lest the Gossoon should have some fresh manœuvre or practise some artifice for which he was unprepared. They were like two wild beasts, determined upon an encounter—whose ferocious instincts could not be otherwise appeased—yet neither daring to commence the attack—each waiting to take the other at disadvantage—their eyes glaring—their forms quivering, with every muscle and tendon vibrating under the influence of terrific excitement and suspense.

At length, with characteristic desperation, the Burker sprang at his foe, whom he endeavoured to clutch by the throat: but the Gossoon to a certain extent avoiding the attack, seized the Burker round the waist and hurled him to the ground—thus repeating the feat which he had performed at the cave in the jungle. The Englishman however held fast to his opponent; and amidst the grass did they struggle in the immediate vicinage of the mouth of the subterranean. All in a moment there was the sharp, quick, ominous hiss of a

deadly reptile; and a cobra, uprearing its hooded head, darted at the face of the Gossoon, who was uppermost at the instant, his hands clutching the Burker's clothes, and the Burker retaining him likewise in his powerful grasp. The Burker instantaneously sprang up to his feet, horrified and dismayed, a cold perspiration breaking out all over him; while the Gossoon, with an anguished yell, likewise started up, the cobra having bitten him on the cheek. Quick as lightning the half-maddened dervish snatched up a stone, and hurled it at the serpent as it was gliding again amidst the grass. The reptile was stricken just behind its hooded head; and it continued to writhe beneath the stone which held it firmly down to the earth. Making a piteous sign to the Burker to leave him unmolested, the Gossoon hastily gathered some herbs, which he selected from amongst the grass; and putting them into his mouth, he began to chew them,—his whole frame quivering with the nervous excitement and suspense of his feelings. For a few minutes the Burker looked on, he himself being scarcely able to shake off the horrifying sensation which had seized upon him at this terrific interruption of the struggle with the Gossoon: but as he gradually collected his ideas, he began to deliberate on the course which he should pursue. The Gossoon, having chewed the herbs into a poultice, applied it to his cheek with one hand—while with the other he made deprecating signs to the Burker, evidently entreating him to let him have this one last chance of life, and that under existing circumstances all personal hostility should be suspended. But the Englishman was already reflecting that if the medicinal properties of the herbs should neutralize the venom of the snake-bite—in short, if the Gossoon should continue to enjoy a hale and vigorous life—they would stand towards each other in precisely the same position as before. They would have the same feeling that the security of the one could only be guaranteed by the death of the other — for they were mutually suspicious,—the Burker especially could no longer trust the Gossoon,—and the latter had moreover given him a suggestion, to the effect that the treasure might as well be possessed by one as by both.

Thus was it that the Burker came to the conclusion that it were ridiculous to lose the present opportunity, and to suffer the Gossoon to obtain an advantage over him. He therefore all in a moment darted back a few yards, caught up a huge stone in both his hands, and hurled it at the Hindoo. The latter beheld the movement and started aside: but that movement was too rapid to fail altogether in its effect; and the stone, instead of striking the head of the dervish, smote him on the shoulder. Down he fell, sending forth a howl that reverberated through the ruins: but the Burker suffered not an instant to elapse ere he repeated the assault. Another stone was flung—this time with better effect: it struck the Gossoon upon the head. The crashing of his skull would have sounded horrible upon the ears of any other person but the Burker, who remorselessly hastened to despatch his victim.

Thus was the Burker rid of the Gossoon—the man who had been his companion—in some sense his friend—but chiefly an enemy. Sole master of the treasure was the Burker now: but how could he render it available? He had no means of conveyance for such a quantity of jars; and if he were to load himself with the coin, he could bear but comparatively a small portion of it away with him. He must have time to reflect. But he remembered that if any of the inhabitants, or authorities of the district, or any wayfarers should happen to find him amongst those ruins with a corpse, it would be instantaneously supposed that he had committed a foul murder, without provocation, and without the faintest shadow of excuse for the crime. He therefore resolved to conceal the dead body; and having rifled it, he dragged it to the extremity of the ruins, where he covered it with fragments of the dilapidated masonry. When this was done, the Burker sat down upon a mass of granite to think of the course which he should now pursue. To remove the treasure without a vehicle, was impossible: to obtain one without exciting suspicion of some sort or another, seemed equally impracticable for a person situated as he was. True, he had a quantity of money about him, his own bag of rupees, and the Gossoon's likewise; for he had taken this from about the person of the corpse:—but his wretched apparel, his ill-looks, and his suspicious appearance would inevitably bring him into trouble if he were to proceed to any house and exhibit sufficient coin for the hire or purchase of a cart. Then, what was he to do? The only plan appeared to be the first which he had thought of—namely, that of securing about his person as much of the treasure as possible, and taking his departure from that spot.

Having made up his mind to the pursuance of this course, the Burker proceeded to manufacture a couple of torches similar to those which he had just now seen the Gossoon make; and inasmuch as from the rifled garments of the corpse he had procured the materials for striking a light, he prepared for another descent into the subterranean. The sliding trap-door of masonry was opened; and, having lighted one of his torches, the Burker descended the steps. But not many moments had he been in the cavern, when he was startled by hearing a sort of subdued growl somewhere within the ruins. He thought that it must be fancy—or at least endeavoured to persuade himself that it was: but the sound was repeated—and it was accompanied by a slight rustling of the long grass where it was not cleared away. For a few instants the Englishman was so paralysed by mortal terror as to be unable to take any decisive step, until suspense grew horrible beyond all endurance; and then, with a torch still burning in his hand, he began to ascend the steps. With exceeding caution—shuddering from head to foot—and horribly alarmed lest some wild animal should spring at him, the Burker thus raised himself up until his eyes could just look over the level of the aperture. Then a fierce growl saluted his ears, instantaneously followed by a second sound which may be described as a savage howl of affright; and he beheld a huge tiger retreating slowly, evidently in alarm at the light of the torch. The Burker was so smitten with consternation that he nearly fell down the steps: but suddenly recovering his presence of mind, he closed the trap-door, all except about an inch; and he left it thus far open for two reasons. The first was that the spring might

not be so acted upon as to prevent him from opening the trap-door again from within the cavern; and the other was that he might not altogether shut out the air necessary for life. So horribly bewildered however were the wretched man's thoughts, that it struck him not at the instant that the first reason was alone sufficient as a motive for leaving the trap-door partially unclosed, without the adjunctive of the second. Yet both ideas had flashed to his mind at the same instant; and even in the hideous turmoil of his thoughts they had suggested that precautionary measure.

He now lost no time in lighting the second torch—for the first was nearly extinct; and he shrank from the idea of being left in the dark in that subterranean. He heard the stealthy cat-like paces of the tiger returning to the trap-door which covered the aperture of the cavern; and his blood congealed with horror lest the monster should be by any means enabled to get at him. Next he heard the tiger sniffing about above the trap-door; and then, through the slight opening which he had left, he could perceive a dark substance intercepting the light. A low savage growl made him aware that the tiger had scented his presence in the cavern; and returning up the steps, he suddenly thrust the torch upward in such a way that the flame ascended through the crevice. So furious a roar burst from the throat of the tiger that the ruins appeared to be all alive with horrible sounds; and the Burker was terrified at the result of his proceeding. He listened with suspended breath: he could hear nothing—he hoped that the wild beast was gone. The torch was burning out: in a few more minutes he would be in darkness. All continued silent: he began to breathe more freely: but now the torch was extinct. Should he ascend from the cavern?—dared he leave his hiding-place? At all events should he not first carry out his design of securing as much coin as possible about his person?

Scarcely had he mentally asked himself these questions,—or rather, we should say, scarcely were they shaped by the current of his thoughts, when another subdued growl reached his ears; and this was speedily followed by different sounds. There was the tearing down of masonry—the hurling about of stones—the rushing movements of the wild beast,—all mingled with fierce and savage, but still subdued growlings. The Burker speedily comprehended what the monster was about. The tiger had discovered the corpse of the Gossoon in its rude uncouth sepulchre; and the beast was clearing all obstacles away, previous to dragging it forth. Now the Burker could at length tell that this was achieved: for the noise of the tiger's savage gambollings reached the ears of the horrified wretch who was pent up in the cavern. As a cat plays with a mouse, so was the wild beast disporting with the dead body.

The Burker was in utter darkness, save and except where a feeble glimmering penetrated through the chink caused by the slightly opened trap-door: but this gleaming was gradually growing fainter and fainter, as the shades of evening were closing in upon the earth. Good heavens! was the Englishman to remain all night in that cavern, with the horrible tiger watching an opportunity to make him its prey? The thought was enough to turn his brain. There he was, surrounded by riches sufficient to enable him to revel in all luxuries for the remainder of his life, however extended that life might be: but he would gladly give all the contents of those jars for the privilege of being seated in some wretched khan, over a sorry mess of rice, so long as it was in the midst of a town within the limits of which the tiger would not be likely to come.

It did not appear that the wild beast chose to banquet upon the dead man: the tiger was doubtless waiting for the living one. Its maw required to be refreshed with the warm blood gushing from veins just torn open; and it could not be appeased by the blood that had stagnated in the veins of the dead. But ever and anon the tiger came to the trap-door at the mouth of the cavern—scraping, scratching, and tearing with its paws, as if by some means to widen the chink left by the partially opened masonry. Then, at those times, the Burker's blood would curdle almost as completely as that of the dead Gossoon: for he was tortured with the horrible apprehension that the tiger might manage to tear open the trap-door, or rather make it slide completely back. And during the intervals between the wild beast's visits to the trap-door, other frightful ideas crept into the Burker's mind. Perhaps there might be reptiles in that cavern? perhaps some deadly snake was gliding towards him, stealthy, insidious, and noiseless, to dart at his leg or twine up it? Oh! what maledictions did the Burker invoke upon the jars of treasure which he had discovered!—how heartily did he wish that the instant the Gossoon was dead he had rushed away from the spot!

An hour passed in the frightful manner which we have been describing, until at length the tiger stretched itself down upon the trap-door, as if resolved to wait until its intended victim should be by some means or another compelled to come forth. At first the wild beast was restless and uneasy, continuing to claw at that trap-door, and growling, sometimes loudly, sometimes in a subdued manner, until at length it appeared to fall asleep—or at all events it remained perfectly still. The Burker was fearful lest the monstrous beast should lie so completely over the chink as to shut out all the fresh air; for he had already become sensible of the close and stagnating nature of the atmosphere in that subterranean. But it happened that the tiger did not thus cover up that opening with its furred form: no doubt it was lying there with its muzzle close to the very opening itself, so as to be in readiness to seize upon its victim at his first endeavour to issue from the subterranean trap in which, mouse-like, he was caught.

Thus passed the night. We might fill whole pages by depicting the horrible thoughts which raged and agitated in the mind of the Burker—thoughts which fastened like vulture-talons on his brain—thoughts which at one time goaded him almost to madness, and which at another froze all the blood in his veins and produced a sensation which struck like an ice-chill to his heart. But all these details we must leave to be elaborated by the conception of our readers. Suffice it to say that the Burker passed such a night as must have atoned—if earthly penalties ever *can* atone—for no small portion of the misdeeds that had branded his life!

As the morning began to dawn, the tiger rose

from off the trap-door, and walked round and round it for upwards of an hour, giving vent to subdued growls the whole time. Then, suddenly —with one tremendous roar—it appeared to fling itself with a kind of desperation upon the partial opening of the trap-door, tearing at it with its claws, lashing its own sides and the ground with its tail—evidently furious and frantic at being thus kept away from the victim it sought to clutch: but at last finding its efforts were all of no avail, the animal desisted, and the Burker could hear its cat-like paces retreating from the vicinage of the trap-door. Nearly an hour passed; and there were no evidences of the return of the tiger nor of its presence anywhere within the precincts of the ruins. The Burker began to take courage: he knew that wild beasts seldom prowl about in the open country during the broad daylight; and he was resolved that the monster should not catch him there again in the evening. Cautiously sliding back the trap-door, he looked out; and the coast seemed clear—at least within the range of his vision. He felt cheered and invigorated by breathing the fresh air; and emerging completely from the cavern, he looked in the direction of the spot where he had concealed the Gossoon. A hideous spectacle met his eyes. All the clothing was stripped off the corpse, and lay scattered about in rags and tatters. The stones with which the dead body were covered, had been cast or rolled to a considerable distance—thereby proving the strength of the wild beast. As for the corpse itself, it was frightfully lacerated, mangled, and mutilated: in many places the flesh was completely torn off the bones by the claws of the tiger; but it did not appear as if the animal had banqueted upon any of the flesh.

The Burker had possessed himself of the dead Gossoon's wallet, containing the remnant of that individual's provisions; and he now made a copious meal, washing it down with a good draught of the potent alcohol. He then resolved to carry into execution his plan of quitting the ruins: but first he peeped cautiously forth to assure himself that the tiger was not still loitering about in the neighbourhood. On this point he was satisfied; and descending again into the cavern, he was about to secure a quantity of the treasure—as much indeed as he could carry off—when he heard a singular sound, like the blowing of a trumpet. Rushing up the steps, he looked forth from the ruins; and he beheld a colossal elephant approaching, with a mahout, or driver, seated upon his back. This individual was a Hindoo—not above thirty years of age—with rather a handsome countenance—and an expression of benevolence as well as of good-humour. He did not exhibit much surprise on beholding the Burker,—doubtless for the reason that he was accustomed to frequent those cities and towns where Europeans swarmed; and he addressed the Englishman in the customary terms of morning salutation. These the Burker understood; and he replied to the best of his ability. Pleased with the aspect of the man —taking his demeanour to be friendly—and gazing upon the colossal proportions of the elephant, which had sent forth that trumpet-sound from its trunk,—the Burker was smitten with an idea. He would make a confidant of the mahout in respect to the treasure; the whole or at least the greater portion might be conveyed away by the elephant; and when some distant place of safety was reached, it might be fairly divided.

The Burker accordingly made rapid signs for the mahout to enter the ruins with him; and he likewise spoke as many words of Hindostanee as he could command, to make his new acquaintance aware that a tiger had visited the scene, so that the mahout should be prepared for beholding the mangled corpse of the Gossoon. On the terrible word "tiger" being mentioned, the Hindoo armed himself with a brace of pistols, which were in the holsters attached to the girth of the little seat upon the elephant's back; and quitting the docile animal, he followed the Burker into the ruins. The Hindoo was horrified on beholding the corpse of the Gossoon: but by his looks he evidently comprehended that the Burker had told him the truth in respect to the mutilations having been effected by a wild beast. The Englishman now directed the mahout's attention to the sliding trap-door; and lighting a torch, he led the way down into the cavern. The Hindoo followed him in fullest confidence — as indeed he well might; for he was armed with pistols and other weapons, whereas the Burker was defenceless. On beholding the vases filled with coins, the native's countenance expressed admiration, wonder, and joy; and the Englishman, by means of signs and the few words which he could command, gave him to understand that they would remove and share this hoard of wealth. The mahout grasped the Burker's hand in ratification of the bargain, as well as in token of friendship; and they went to work accordingly.

The mahout was provided with immense bags, in which he was accustomed to carry the elephant's provender: these were slung over the animal's back—the jars were brought forth—and the coin was consigned to those sacks. But the Hindoo—though an honest, good-tempered fellow—was not altogether without the characteristic cunning of his race; and in order to prevent the coins from jingling in the bags, he expertly put thin layers of grass and large leaves. In a short time the sacks were filled to the extent which the mahout thought the elephant could conveniently bear; and the remainder of the coin was secured about the persons of the two men.

They now set out together, both mounted upon the elephant; and the Burker was rejoiced to find that the mahout's way was in quite the contrary direction from the town where he had seen the horrible tortures administered, and whence he had been scared off by the warning of the police official. The Hindoo endeavoured to make the Burker understand the destination for which he was bound and the length of the journey which he had to perform: but the Englishman's acquaintance with Hindostanee was much too limited to enable him to comprehend his new friend's meaning. It was however sufficient for the Burker that he had at length fallen in with one who seemed friendly disposed towards him, and who had an identical interest with his own, so to speak, in reference to the treasure whereof they had obtained possession.

In a few hours a town became visible in the distance; and the travellers reached a point where the road branched off into two—one leading direct

towards that town. The mahout guided the elephant into the diverging road,—making signs to the Burker that it would be prudent to avoid the town, for fear lest the secret of the treasure should be discovered. They presently halted at a farm-house, where the mahout displayed some document which he carried about with him; and the presentation of this paper at once ensured the two travellers a hospitable reception. The Burker therefore concluded that the elephant and its driver belonged to some high authority, whose hands had furnished the passport which thus commanded friendly treatment.

At that farm-house they remained during the sultriest hours of the day,—the mahout keeping his eye continuously upon the elephant, so as to prevent any person about the premises from detecting the secret of the treasure: nor did it appear to excite any astonishment that he would not suffer the animal to be relieved from the burden which he carried. Towards evening the journey was renewed; and it was continued until about an hour after dusk, when another halt was made at a village, or rather large hamlet, consisting of about three dozen wretched hovels. Here the presentation of the passport secured for the elephant the only stable that was to be found in the place; and the mahout took care that no one else should be present when he and the Burker relieved the animal from its load. Having furnished the elephant with provender, and locked up the stable, the mahout, followed by the Englishman, proceeded to the khan,—where an ample meal was provided from the residence of the Mayor of the village. A flask of good liquor accompanied it: the Hindoo and the Englishman ate and drank to their hearts' content; and the more the latter saw of the former, the better he liked him. Presently the native produced pipes and tobacco—a luxury of which the Burker gladly availed himself: but he had not smoked long when he felt as if his head were swimming round — the pipe dropped from his hand—and he sank upon the bench in the unconsciousnes of profound slumber.

When he awoke in the morning, he was some time before he could collect his ideas: but when his memory began to grow settled, an idea of treachery on the part of the mahout swept through his brain. This appeared to receive a terrible confirmation, when on looking around, he discovered that he was alone. He was on the point of giving way to his rage, when he felt that the money he had secured about his person was still all in safety there; and in a few moments the mahout made his appearance. The Burker's countenance instantaneously cleared up—while the native burst out into a merry peal of laughter, at the same time pointing to the broken pipe which lay upon the floor, and tapping his head significantly. The Burker comprehended his friend's meaning, which was to the effect that the tobacco had proved too strong for him. The mahout had been to look after his elephant; a good meal was now brought in from the Mayor's cottage; and the Burker did all the more justice to the provisions, inasmuch as his mind was relieved from the cruel apprehensions which for a moment had smitten it; and he now felt that the completest reliance could be placed in the integrity of his companion.

The journey was resumed: and for two or three hours the road lay through a tract of country where habitations were to be seen only at very distant intervals. At length, at about mid-day, when the heat of the sun was growing of an intolerable sultriness, a halt was made at a farm-house at no great distance from a town which appeared to be of considerable extent. The Hindoo however gave the Burker to understand that the town would be avoided when their journey was resumed. The passport, as heretofore, ensured the travellers a welcome reception on the part of the native and his family who inhabited the farm-house; and still the mahout looked carefully after his elephant.

They had not been half-an-hour at this farm-house, when half-a-dozen horsemen were seen advancing; and the Burker felt somewhat uncomfortable on recognising the uniforms of the Peons, or policemen. He fancied likewise, by the aspect of the mahout, that this individual would rather have avoided the company into which he was about to be thrown. The Peons came up, dismounted from their horses, and led them into the stable to which the elephant had been consigned. Just within the doorway of the stable the mahout and the Burker had posted themselves; and they were at the time partaking of the provisions so bounteously furnished by the occupants of the farm-house.

The Peons looked suspiciously at the Burker: but the mahout hastened to say something—which produced a change in their aspect; and the native himself went on conversing with the new-comers in a friendly manner. The Peons proceeded to stable their horses; while the mahout glanced anxiously at the Burker and then at his elephant; so that he was evidently uneasy in respect to the secret of the treasure. One of the Peons, while attending to his horse, happened to knock his elbow with some degree of severity against the sack that was nearest,—the burden having remained upon the elephant's back: for the mahout had feared that if he and the Burker removed it, its exceeding weight would have excited the suspicions of the inhabitants of the farm-house. The Peon, evidently astonished at the hardness of the contents of that sack, proceeded, with a curiosity that was natural enough, to feel the bag with his hand; and he soon discovered that it was filled with coin. An ejaculation made known this discovery to his companions; and, abandoning their horses, they hastened to the spot.

The mahout flung upon the Burker a glance which was as much as to imply that all their presence of mind would now be needed; and then, with a remarkable self-possession on his own part, he hastened to give the Peons some explanation. What this was, the Burker could not understand: but it evidently required to be backed by some corroborative testimony; for the mahout, producing his passport, or whatever the official document were, displayed it to the Peons. They looked at each other, and shook their heads dubiously. The Burker felt that a storm was about to burst; and he was taught another moral, to the effect that the possession of riches does not always ensure the contentment, happiness, and safety of their owner. Indeed this moral was very energetically illustrated, when the Peons seized upon himself and the elephant-driver.

The mahout protested vehemently against this proceeding—and with so much appearance of truthfulness on his side, that the Burker could scarcely believe he had told a tissue of falsehoods to account for the bags being filled with coin—though he had indeed done so. The Peons were however incredulous; and while some of them retained the Burker and the mahout in their custody, the others proceeded to examine the sacks. When they found that these contained such a vast quantity of treasure, and that the coins themselves were blackened with age, they were more remote than ever from giving credit to the tale, whatever it were, which the elephant-driver had told them. A personal examination, moreover, made them aware that the two prisoners had large amounts of similar coin concealed amongst their garments; and therefore the minds of the police-officials were made up relative to the course which they should pursue. This was communicated to the mahout, who furtively flung upon his English companion anything but a pleasant look. Some of the tenants of the homestead now gathered at the stable-door; and the Burker saw that himself and his comrade in misfortune were looked upon with a very evil eye, as if indeed they were a couple of arrant knaves and thieves, or even worse.

To be brief—when the sultry hours had passed away, and evening was approaching—the cavalcade was put in motion: the Peons took charge of the elephant—the mahout and the Burker were conducted as prisoners to that town which they had already seen in the neighbourhood. On arriving there, the captives were led into the presence of an officer of the Peons; and the mahout told his story, at the same time producing his passport. We should observe that all the coin which he and the Burker had about their persons, was already taken possession of by the Peons at the farm-house.

The officer of the Peons listened with attention; and when the mahout had finished, he addressed a few words to the Burker. This individual gave the official to understand that he was not acquainted with the Hindostanee tongue: but a native interpreter was speedily forthcoming. Through this medium, the Burker was desired to explain what he knew of the circumstances that had led to the arrest of himself and his companion. He felt horribly perplexed. What tale could he possibly tell?—how could he render it consistent with that which the mahout had already told, and of the nature of which he was in the profoundest ignorance? Something however must be said; and the Burker was not very long at a loss upon the subject. He accordingly declared that he had fallen in with the mahout on the previous day—that the elephant-driver had given him a lift upon his animal—and that as the bags were too plethoric with their metallic contents, he had been asked as a favour to carry a portion about his own person. The Burker was then desired to account for the fact that two small bags of new rupees had been found upon him; for it was intimated that his personal appearance did not warrant the idea that he possessed any such resources of his own—or at least did not justify the belief that he had honestly come by them. Thinking that the money would never be restored to him, and that he had better boldly renounce all ownership of it, the Burker declared that the two bags of new rupees had likewise been entrusted to him by the mahout. When all these statements were interpreted to the officer of Peons, the elephant-driver bent a look of reproach upon the Burker, evidently to accuse him of the blackest ingratitude in endeavouring to shift all the blame from his own shoulders to those of his companion. It was quite clear to the Englishman that his statements were completely at variance with those made by the mahout: for the examining police-official shook his head incredulously, and issued some order to his underlings. This mandate was promptly obeyed; for the Burker and the elephant-driver were hurried into an adjacent room;—and here the horrified eyes of the Englishman fell upon implements of torture similar to those which he had seen at the town whence he was expelled with so significant a warning. As for the mahout, he folded his arms and contemplated the torture-instruments with a courageous resignation.

The Burker was the first to be subjected to the torturing process,—the interpreter standing near to receive whatsoever revelations might be extracted from his lips. The kittee was applied to his fingers: the excruciation was exquisite; and under the influence thereof he confessed the whole truth in respect to the discovery of the buried treasure. With regard to the two bags of rupees—which, as the reader will recollect, were obtained by the murder of the Ryot—the Burker declared that he had found them on the person of a Gossoon who was killed by a tiger.

The mahout was next subjected to the torture; and the truth was speedily elicited from his lips. It was now found that the two tales corresponded: but by way of punishing the prisoners, a severe beating was inflicted upon them with sticks and whips. The Burker howled horribly: the Hindoo exhibited far more courage in enduring the chastisement. The officer of Peons then pronounced a decision in the case, which was duly interpreted to the Burker. It was to the effect that the treasure which had been found belonged to the Government, and should be appropriated accordingly; that with regard to the two bags of new rupees found upon the Burker himself, he had no right to self-appropriate the money belonging to the Gossoon who was killed by the tiger; and that therefore all such moneys should be devoted to public charity—(or, in other words, would go into the pockets of the Peons themselves). Lastly, it was ordained that both the prisoners should be set at liberty, with free permission to pursue their ways—the mahout having the elephant restored to him.

The Burker, on being released, slunk out of the torture-room, not daring to meet the indignant looks of his late companion, with whom he felt all friendship to be completely at an end. Thus, with an empty wallet at his back, and not the smallest coin in his pocket, the Englishman found himself once more a friendless outcast and forlorn wanderer in that land where the most terrible calamities had already befallen him. His fingers were cruelly swollen with the application of the kittee: his body was all bruised and his limbs stiffened with the fustigation he had received. It was night; and he dragged himself painfully through the streets of the town. He looked about for the public khan; and after awhile succeeded in finding it. But it was occupied by a number of

Gossoons and other travellers of the lowest class; and he beheld little sympathy in their looks—though he gave them to understand that he was hungry and foodless. One of the Gossoons, happening to notice his swollen fingers, ejaculated a few words, amongst which *kittee* was the only one that was intelligible to the Burker's ears; and the whole assembly burst forth into a loud laugh. At length a snake-charmer—who had his basket of cobras near him—taking compassion upon the wretched Englishman, gave him a portion of his rice; and the Burker, retreating into the darkest corner, devoured the meal with avidity. He then lay down to sleep; and when morning dawned, he wakened to a renewed sense of his utter loneliness—his complete friendlessness—his hopeless, miserable condition.

To the snake-charmer he was indebted for another meal: he then issued from the khan: but as he was threading the street, he met the interpreter who had officiated on the previous evening. This individual gave him to understand that if he were wise he would not be seen loitering about the town; and he accordingly profited by this counsel. He left the place, resuming his wanderings in the open country. Again did despair seize upon him: but still he had not the courage to put an end to his miseries by means of suicide. By degrees he began to buoy himself up with the hope that something might yet transpire to refill his pocket—in which case he was resolved to act more prudently than he had hitherto done. He bitterly repented his unhandsome conduct towards the elephant-driver,—inasmuch as this individual, naturally generous-hearted, might have befriended him had he only remained staunch when the examination was over. But it was too late to regret that which could not be recalled; and the Burker was taught another severe lesson relative to the disastrous consequences of iniquitous behaviour towards one's fellow-creatures.

CHAPTER CLXI.

THE DANCERS.

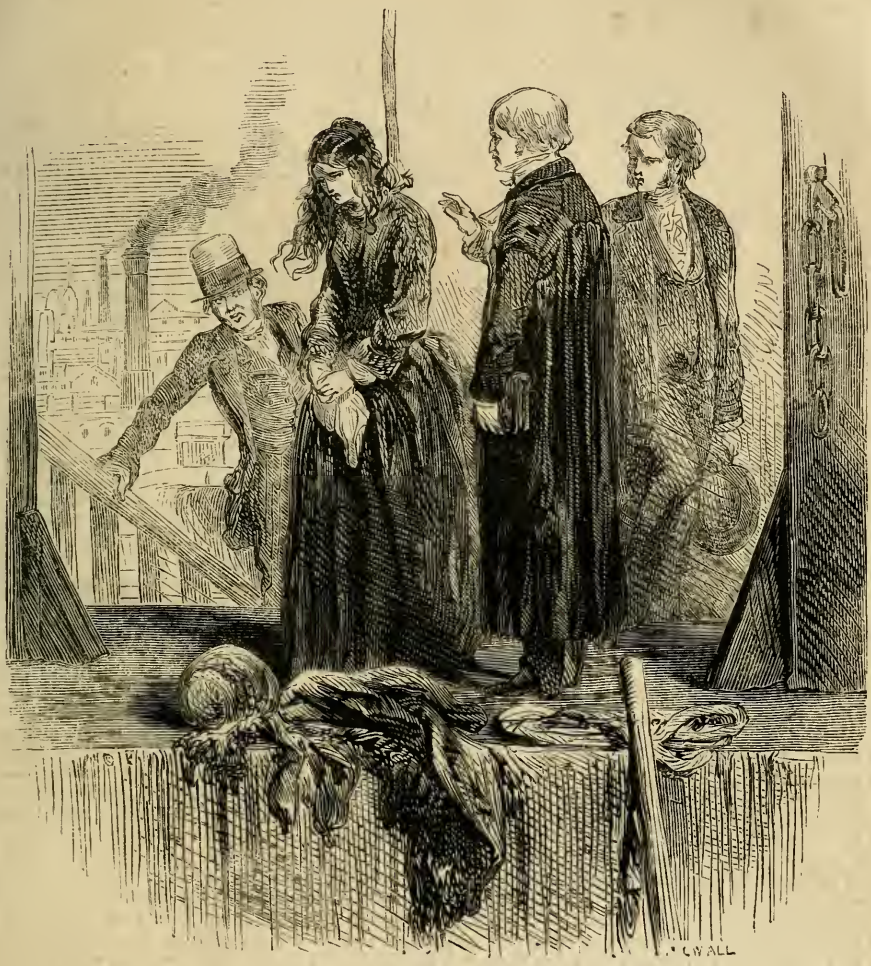
BENEATH the rays of the burning Indian sun, that outcast European toiled upon his way. Since he escaped from prisonage in the royal city of Inderabad, what adventures had he experienced! what perils had he passed through! what sights had he witnessed! If suddenly some good genius or friendly hand had transported him back to his native clime, what a book could he have written of his experiences of Indian life! He had been cast into the midst of all the worst and most hideous phases of that oriental existence, as if he had been flung into a morass swarming with reptiles. He had seen the combats of wild beasts; he had listened to the crashing of bones when circled by the deadly folds of the monster snake; he had lain down to rest amidst the haunts of serpents; he had battled with Stranglers; he had been the associate of the Gossoon; he had penetrated into the secret treasure-chamber of the once proud Pagan temple; he had witnessed and endured the torture inflicted by the native officials under the sanction of the British authorities. Yes—what a volume could this man have written, had he possessed the ability and were he placed in a position to do so! But what was to be his doom? —what destiny was in store for him? Had it been typified in any horrible occurrence which he himself had witnessed? or was some new phase of hideous excruciation to develop itself to seal the fate of that man of a thousand misdeeds?

After he quitted the town he was, as we have seen, for awhile a prey to despair: but his was one of those resolute dogged callous souls—a soul so tanned, hardened, and petrified by an existence of peril and of crime—that it was scarcely probable he would long abandon himself to despondency when no immediate danger was staring him in the face. Thus was it that homeless, friendless, foodless, and moneyless though he were, he still found something worth living for: he even entertained the hope that things might mend, and that accident would again turn up some advantage for him especially to reap.

He continued his way until the heat was growing intolerable; and then he approached a farmhouse for the purpose of soliciting refuge and refreshment. He was however driven away by several native labourers, who liked not his appearance; and his wanderings were continued. Presently he reached a long avenue of trees overshadowing a stream, beyond which stretched the undulating fields; and he fancied that he heard the sounds of female voices. He drew nearer: he looked through the trees; and he beheld a number of dusky native girls disporting in the water. They were in a completely nude condition, though the greater portion of their forms was immersed in the streamlet. All of them were exceedingly beautiful; and the Englishman was struck by the admirable modelling of the contours of the busts. Their long jetty hair, now shining with the gloss of moisture, floated over their sculptural shoulders and down ther backs; and their dark eyes acquired an additional lustre from the pearly drops which hung to the long ebon lashes and glistened in the sunbeams that penetrated through the openings in the trees. They were gambolling and disporting as if they were the dusky naiads of their own native rivers,—now diving down to the depths of the stream—now plunging in their heads, and then smoothing their hair to wring out the water —now spattering and splashing each other—and all the while laughing and chatting merrily. It was an interesting scene: but the Burker viewed it only with eyes that gloated upon the charms which were revealed, and with an imagination that grew more and more inflamed with desire.

A little farther along the stream, a number of young men were bathing; and they likewise were disporting in the water. The Burker did not immediately catch sight of them, so intent was he on feasting his eyes with the former spectacle which we have described. But at length he heard some of the girls calling to the young men, and the latter answering; so that he was thus led to surmise they all belonged to the same party.

Presently the young women began one after another to ascend from the stream, and slowly to resume their apparel. The Burker, still remaining concealed from their observation, watched them with devouring eyes; and slowly the thought crept into his mind that he had before seen two or three



which his former experiences were so hideous and so horrible. Perhaps, he thought to himself, his circuitous wanderings might possibly have brought him back into that same terrible maze; and he almost wished that it was so, for he fancied that if he could find his way to the cavern, he might thence remember the direction which had led him to an issue into a place of safety. Thus he wandered on and on, endeavouring to buoy himself up with hope—but nevertheless having the sickening conviction that it was feeble indeed. He grew more and more desponding: he found it to be in vain to struggle against the despair which was growing upon him—hemming him in closer and closer—narrowing the circle which for a little while he had managed to keep at a distance. He felt like a doomed man: a presentiment that his hour approached, was creeping upon him—stealing into his soul—gnawing as it were into his heart's core—making the perspiration feel colder and more clammy upon his brow and all over his form, despite the torrid sunbeams that poured their full glare upon him as he dragged his weary limbs along. It was thus in this wretched frame of mind that the Burker pursued his way through the jungle: but the catastrophe was near at hand. He presently fancied that he discovered something like a beaten path; and for a few moments joy sprang up in his soul. But the seeming path was suddenly lost in the midst of tall rank herbage, where stood a solitary tree. Though hitherto so careful to avoid the neighbourhood of trees, yet the Burker disregarded on this occasion his wonted caution: for he thought that the path might be only encumbered by the thickets of weeds and bushes, and that it might be continued on the other side. He was pursuing his way, when quick as the lightning-flash leaps forth from the storm-cloud, a tremendous snake sprang down from the tree, and more quickly than the eye can

wink, the wretched man was enfolded in the awful prisonage of its coils.

Oh, what a wild cry of agony rang through the jungle! But here our description must stop short: we cannot enter deliberately into the painful details of that wretched criminal's sufferings, both mental and physical, which lasted for many hours, until the huge reptile with its constricting power crushed the breath out of its victim's body.

CHAPTER CLXIII.

INDERABAD.

Queen Indora and her royal husband were making a tour of their dominions, at the time the magnificent procession passed like a gorgeous panorama before the view of the concealed English fugitive. It was Indora's object to introduce her consort to the principal cities and towns of the Kingdom of Inderabad, and at the same time to receive the memorials and petitions of those of her subjects who had representations to make or grievances to complain of. She and her husband travelled with the accustomed pomp of oriental potentates,—not that they themselves were flattered by this display of ostentation and ceremony, but because they considered it expedient to follow the course that was in accordance with the habits, manners, and prejudices of the country. At every town which they visited, the municipal authorities prepared the most welcome reception for the royal travellers; and this was no false nor hollow parade of sycophantic feelings—but it was the sincere enthusiasm of persons who were satisfied with their rulers. Those very municipal corporations themselves owed their existence to the enlightened policy which Indora's husband, when plain Clement Redcliffe, had recommended for the adoption of the King of Inderabad; and thus all those town-councillors pressed forward with a genuine feeling of gratitude to welcome the personage to whose enlightened advice they were indebted for the civic privilege of self-government. Nor less were they enthusiastic in their welcome of that lady who had raised to her side upon the throne the man whose name had for years past been idolized in Inderabad—the enlightened English reformer to whose policy that kingdom owed the liberty of its institutions and the spirit of strict justice which animated the execution of its laws.

The royal tour was a series of pageants, festivities, and rejoicings. From the palatial mansion to the humblest cottage the effect of the liberal policy which Indora's husband had in times past initiated, was everywhere felt; and in the breasts of all grades beat hearts that were full of enthusiasm for their intelligent King and his grandly handsome wife. In every city and town a High Court was held, at which all memorials and petitions were received: but few were the complaints brought under the cognizance of their Majesties. In these rare instances where it *did* occur, the minutest investigation took place; and chastisement was inflicted on the offending authorities. The manner in which justice was thus distributed, enhanced the admiration already experienced by the people for their illustrious rulers; and the judges, magistrates, and other functionaries of the law were taught the lesson that as their good conduct was certain to be rewarded, any dereliction on their part was on the other hand equally sure to be detected and punished.

It was the determination of Queen Indora and her royal husband that Inderabad should be rendered the model state of Hindostan;—that all its internal resources should be developed to the utmost, not for the mere benefit of a few, but for the advantage of the many. According to old prejudice, there were still some few offices which were hereditary in particular families: but this system was completely abolished; and all those situations were thrown open to the general competition of merit. Schools were established, and a good national system of education was founded. In short, every measure was taken to ensure the welfare, the prosperity, and the happiness of the millions over whom Queen Indora and her husband ruled so carefully and so well.

When the tour was completed, the royal procession returned to the capital. It was a grand day for Inderabad,—that one on which the whole population of the city poured forth to welcome the return of their King and Queen. These illustrious personages were received with the loudest acclamations; and here again the enthusiasm was all genuine: it was not the false, hollow, motiveless, and unmerited adulation which attends upon the progress of Royalty in other countries of the world, especially in those of Europe.

And now let us look into the interior of the palace at Inderabad. There we shall behold the Queen and her illustrious consort seated upon their thrones, in the great audience-hall, giving an affable and gracious reception to all the high dignitaries of the kingdom, to the councillors, the judges, and the magistrates; and receiving such recommendations or suggestions as each in his own special department might have to offer. And all those dignitaries appeared to be inspired with the same enlightened views and intentions which animated their Sovereigns. If they saw opportunities of effecting improvements or legitimate economies in the departments over which they presided, they manifested the most enlightened zeal to take the initiative of their own accord, instead of waiting until public clamour demanded ameliorations or insisted upon the abolition of abuses. It was no mere meaningless levee which those Sovereigns thus held: it had good business-purposes in view; and Queen Indora as well as her husband felt, when the reception was concluded, that they had not sat upon thrones as idols to receive an adulation which should be offered to God alone, and which is impious when offered to mere mortals,—but that the hours they devoted to the ceremony were fraught with real sterling benefit to their subjects.

The audience being finished, the King and Queen retired awhile to their own private apartments; and thither we will follow the splendid Indora. We shall now find her seated in an elegantly-furnished boudoir, attended by half-a dozen of her ladies, with whom she conversed upon intellectual topics. The most serious sage might have been a listener without finding his common sense out-

raged or his soul disgusted by any frivolities on the part of that beauteous bevy. Presently the Queen bethought herself of something; and she gave instructions to one of her ladies,—who immediately retired to execute it. In about half-an-hour a young woman, in an European dress, was introduced into the boudoir; and she threw herself upon her knees at the feet of the Queen.

"Rise, Amy," said her Majesty: and then she made a sign for all her ladies to retire. "Sit down by my side," continued Indora; "and tell me how fares it now with your sister Marion?—how has she borne herself during the three months of my absence on my tour through my kingdom?"

"Your Majesty may judge by my countenance," replied Amy Sutton, with a tone and look of the deepest gratitude, "whether I have reason to be rejoiced at the conduct of my sister Marion. I feel convinced that she is thoroughly reformed—that she is completely penitent for her past errors—and that no temptation could now possibly draw her aside from the path of virtue."

"This is indeed gladdening intelligence, Amy," said Indora. "And your sister is still pleased with the secluded residence which I allotted to you both?"

"Oh! call it not secluded," exclaimed Miss Sutton, in a tone of grateful enthusiasm, "when it possesses every charm to render it agreeable. How could Marion be otherwise than satisfied with such a sweet spot? A picturesque villa—situated in the midst of a delicious garden, abounding in all the choicest fruits and flowers of this oriental clime——Oh! how deep a debt of gratitude do we both owe to your Majesty and to your illustrious consort the King!"

"I am well rewarded for anything I have done for you both," replied Indora, "by finding that you are grateful—by seeing that you are happy—and by hearing that your sister is so completely reformed. I promised you, Amy, that whenever the day came that you could positively and truthfully assure me of this reformation on your sister's part, I would grant her an audience. Go and conduct her hither."

For a moment there seemed to be some little hesitation and confusion on Amy Sutton's part; and while the blushes were still upon her cheeks, she said, "May it please your Majesty, both myself and my sister have formed a few acquaintances; and amongst them——"

"I think," interrupted Indora, smiling, "that I can penetrate your meaning: and if so, I may save you the confusion of further avowals. It is natural enough!—that is, if my surmise be correct. You have formed acquaintances — and amongst them are doubtless two young men who have not beheld with indifference the good looks of Amy and Marion Sutton. Is it not so?"

"It is, your Majesty," replied the young woman, her cheeks still suffused with blushes.

"And who are these young men?" asked the Queen, her countenance gradually becoming serious.

Amy Sutton replied to the question.

"A Captain and a Lieutenant in the Royal Guard," continued the Queen; "and I happen to recollect them both. Yes—they are good-looking young men. But have you reflected, Amy——"

"Gracious Queen," responded the young woman, "they know everything! Yesterday they simultaneously avowed their sentiments; and I frankly explained to them all the antecedents of my sister and myself. Nothing did I conceal—neither the outrage which had robbed me of my honour—nor the temptations to which Marion had succumbed."

"And what said these young men?" asked Indora.

"I told them, may it please your Majesty," continued Amy, "of all your great kindness towards us both, and of the opportunity which you had afforded my sister of reforming her conduct. I assured them that Marion was indeed deeply penitent. In a word, may it please your Majesty, they will espouse us if we have your gracious permission."

"And that permission will not be refused, Amy," rejoined the Queen. "Some such idea as this I had certainly entertained: indeed I was in hope that you would comfortably settle in my dominions. There must be forgiveness for the erring who are truly penitent; and thus Marion must be forgiven! Go to her—bring her hither—and let me see your contrite sister."

Amy Sutton departed; and in a short time she returned, accompanied by Marion. The latter—so full-blown a beauty in her own native clime—had lost somewhat of the rich luxuriance of her charms: but it seemed as if it were only the meretricious glow that had passed away, leaving her more serious-looking and with the air of one who was now more accustomed to commune with herself. She threw herself at the Queen's feet, and pressed to her lips the royal hand which she moistened with her tears. The Queen bade her rise: she spoke kindly and encouragingly to her; and she gave her excellent advice, without the formality of a severe lecture. It was rather as a friend than with the authority of a Sovereign that Queen Indora thus spoke; and her words produced a powerful effect upon the young woman. At length the two sisters retired, with the assurance that their welfare should ever be watched over by Queen Indora.

If we were to glance into another part of the royal palace, we should find a steady-looking, but a contented and cheerful European, seated in a large comfortable apartment, with a quantity of papers before him. At his right hand upon the table stands an iron cash-box; and the lid being open, its glittering contents of gold and silver are revealed. One after another the domestics of the Royal Household enter this apartment, to receive their monthly salaries, as well as to render an account of the respective offices which they fill. The Englishman speaks the native language with facility: he maintains the proper dignity of a superior official: but there is no undue pride about him—nothing that savours of arrogance in his manner: he is calm and business-like, with a kind word for every one who merits his approbation. He evidently occupies a post of the highest trust and confidence: he holds no mean rank in the royal palace; for the oriental costume which he wears is rich, and he is treated with the utmost respect by those who thus in their turn seek his presence. For this personage is none other than the faithful Mark, now Intendant of the Royal Household in the palace of Inderabad.

Let us look into another apartment in that same palatial dwelling; and we shall find the King, also seated at his desk; and his Majesty is busied with a variety of official documents, as well as with other correspondence. It is his private cabinet to which we thus introduce our reader: it is splendidly furnished; and on one side there is an array of shelves covered with volumes belonging to the best literature of the European nations. Presently Queen Indora enters; and a smile immediately appears on the countenance of her husband as he rises to welcome her. She seats herself by his side; and she tells him all that has just taken place with the two English sisters.

"You have acted kindly and wisely, as you always do, my beloved Indora," answered the King, gazing with mingled affection and admiration upon the gloriously handsome countenance of his splendid Queen. "I know those officers: they are steady, well-conducted young men; and you will perceive, my Indora," continued his Majesty, taking up a paper from a pile upon his desk, "that according to the recommendation of their Colonel, I had placed their names upon this list for speedy promotion. I will see them to-morrow; and they shall assuredly wed these young women of their choice."

The Queen was gratified to find that the project experienced her husband's approval: and the King proceeded to say, "The courier has just arrived with the European letters; and here are a number from our friends in the West. Look, Indora! these are for you: I recognise the writing of my sweet young relative Christina. And here are two or three from Christian to myself. Let us read, and then compare notes."

For some little time the royal couple were occupied with their correspondence; and when they had concluded, they again looked at each other.

"Christian tells me," said the King, "that he has every reason to believe my young friend Stanley—whose father, by the bye, has been created a Peer—is making an impression upon the heart of Christina."

"Oh! then, I see, that you are not more than half in the secret, Bertram!" replied Indora, with a gay and cheerful smile; "for the amiable Christina has written me several long letters, in which she frankly explains her feelings towards Major Stanley——and in short she loves him."

"Ah! is it so?" ejaculated the King. "Then I am indeed truly delighted!"

"I always felt convinced," said Queen Indora, "that so well-principled, pure-minded, and excellent a girl as Christina would triumph successfully over the hallucination which for a time had taken possession of her in respect to Lord Octavian."

"Ah! there is a postscript to the latest of Christian's letters," exclaimed the King. "I had overlooked it! Yes—it is indeed true: the Hon. Major Stanley has been accepted by Christina."

At this moment the door of the royal cabinet opened; and an official made his appearance.

"Tidings, may it please your Majesties, have just reached Inderabad," said the official, —"hideous and horrible tidings they are too—relative to that Englishman who escaped some time ago from one of the State prisons."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the King: "has a criminal's righteous doom in some way overtaken that wretch at last?"

"A doom, sire, the most fearful—the most terrible!" replied the official. "It appears that three or four wandering Gossoons were passing through a jungle in the neighbouring State—they were on their way to a cavern, to which, as I understand, they occasionally retire when pretending to withdraw themselves from the world for purposes of self-mortification; and while traversing that jungle, they beheld a frightful spectacle. The Englishman, still alive, was enfolded in the coils of a monstrous reptile. One of the Gossoons happened to know something of him, I believe: he had seen him before, in the very cavern to which I am alluding——"

"And you say that the wretch still lived?" asked the King, while horror was depicted on his own countenance as well as on that of the Queen.

"Yes, sire—he still lived," rejoined the official. "I have just had the tale from the lips of the Gossoons themselves; and by the description of the man, it is unquestionably the same who escaped from Inderabad. On beholding those Gossoons, he implored them in the most piteous manner to help him. But what could they do? They had no fire-arms; and even while the wretch was shrieking forth in his agony, the coils of the horrible reptile were constricting all the more tightly around him."

"Frightful though the man's death must have been," said the King, shuddering visibly, "it is not cruel nor uncharitable to declare that it was only an adequate retribution for the appalling crimes of which, to our certain knowledge, he has been guilty."

The official withdrew; and the King, following up the spirit of his former observations, said to the Queen, "So true it is, my beloved Indora, that there is punishment in this world for the wicked, and that sooner or later God's vengeance will alight upon their heads!"

CHAPTER CLXIV.

THE EXECUTION.

Horsemonger Lane Gaol is the County Prison for Surrey; and therefore persons committing penal offences on the southern side of the Thames, are committed to that sinister establishment instead of to Newgate.

In a condemned cell at that Surrey prison we shall find Barbara Smedley. She had been convicted at the Central Criminal Court, on the clearest evidence, of having been an accomplice in the murder of Joseph Preston at the little house which she and her husband, together with her mother, Mrs. Webber, occupied at the time in Lambeth. The wretched woman knew that there was no earthly hope for her; and yet she seemed most impenitent. When she stood in the dock and was asked the usual question why sentence of death should not be pronounced, she had insolently pleaded that inasmuch as her husband, who was a participator in the same crime, had only been con-

demned to transportation for life, it would be "a burning shame" to send her to the scaffold. The Judge considerately remonstrated with her,—representing that her husband had availed himself of a special offer made by the Government, and by giving the great criminal Barnes into custody, he had obtained that mercy which was promised in the placard issued by the Secretary of State. Still Mrs. Smedley reasoned with a bold hardihood against the judge's argument,—vowing that as long as her husband was suffered to live, it would be nothing short of downright murder to inflict the extreme penalty upon herself. Sentence was however pronounced; and when the awful judgment of the law was delivered, Bab Smedley was borne shrieking, yelling, and vociferating horribly, from the dock.

She was now in Horsemonger Lane Gaol—in a chamber formed of massive masonry, and with huge iron bars at the window. This window looked upon a passage that was well watched; and thus, even if she removed the bars, escape would be next to impossible. Remove those bars indeed! Many a strong vigorous man had been in that same cell, under a similar sentence, and there had been no escape. Could she—a comparatively weak feeble woman—do that which the powerful arms of stalwart men could not accomplish? No, no!—She knew that she could not: she had neither saw nor file—she had not so much as a nail wherewith to work!

The door was massive: the walls were of a thickness that defied penetration. She was as if entombed in a sepulchre! And yet the threshold of the grave had not yet been passed by her: she was still living—living to endure a terrible death! Did remorse strike her? No: she experienced not compunction for the crimes of which she had been guilty: but she gnashed her teeth with rage—and her eyes glared—and her form quivered with fury—and she clenched her fists until the nails almost penetrated into the flesh,—at the idea that the world, as she termed it, had got the better of her and that the law had mastered her.

The chaplain visited her, and endeavoured to reason her into a better frame of mind: but she listened sullenly and gloomily. She did not choose to display her fiercer passions in the presence of the reverend gentleman, for fear lest he should report her as insubordinate, and she might be subjected to even a sterner coercion than that which she experienced. But when the chaplain had quitted her cell, she laughed scornfully: it was like the mocking laugh of a fiend. The truths of religion had not touched her: death had no terrors for her in respect to the world which lies beyond the grave. It was only on account of the fact of being cut short in the midst of her earthly career, that she felt so deeply; and this depth of feeling was as far removed from true contrition as the poles are asunder. It was, as the reader has seen, the malicious fury of a fiend—the concentrated rage of a demoness—in having been triumphed over by the world and the law.

She was allowed to take a little exercise, either in a courtyard at stated hours, or in the passage communicating with her own cell. She preferred the latter. She did not want, she said, to be made a spectacle to the other prisoners: it was enough to have to look forward to the day when she would become a spectacle for thousands in all the neighbourhood of the gaol.

There were several other cells in the same array with her own, opening into the same passage. These cells were allotted to female prisoners who had committed very serious offences. A couple of days after Bab Smedley's condemnation—and while she was walking to and fro in the passage—the iron gate at the end was opened to give admission to some new prisoner. This was an elderly woman, who was so overcome by grief and was weeping so bitterly, that she had to be sustained by the turnkey who was conducting her in.

"Another candidate for up aloft?" asked Bab Smedley, thus alluding to the scaffold: for at Horsemonger Lane Gaol public executions take place on the roof of the main building.

"Not quite so bad as that," answered the turnkey, disgusted with the flippant hardihood of the condemned woman, and yet not choosing to speak harshly to her from the fact that she *was* condemned.

"Well, what is it, then?" demanded Bab: and without waiting for a reply, she said to the new prisoner, "Come, my good dame, it's no use whimpering here. All the tears in the world won't melt down these walls or soften the iron bars."

"Oh, my heavens! to think that it should have happened at last!" moaned the new prisoner, with bitterest lamentations, as she wrung her hands in despair; and Bab Smedley now discovered that she was a foreign woman from the peculiarity of her accent. "That villain Shadbolt——"

"Ah! he is safe under lock and key likewise—if that's any consolation to you," said the gaol official.

"I know it!" exclaimed Madame Angelique—for she the new prisoner was; "and it is the only consolation! To think that I should have been so mad!"—and she again gave way to her lamentations.

She was now consigned to a cell; and the turnkey locked her in, because the prison-rules would not permit the condemned captive Barbara Smedley to hold conversation with any other inmate.

"Who is she? and what has she done?" asked Bab Smedley of the turnkey.

"She was once a famous milliner—and something else too—at the West End of the town," replied the turnkey. "She retired, as everybody thought, on a good fortune—and had a beautiful villa at Brixton. But a little while ago she seemed suddenly to lose the best part of all she had—that is to say if she ever had it: and she took up with a fellow named Shadbolt, who was once in the detective force. A precious scamp he is—though I daresay that this Frenchwoman knew a trick or two, and didn't require much temptation to lead her to do what she has done."

"And what is that?" asked Bab Smedley.

"Just a little bit of forgery," responded the turnkey. "Of course having been in such a good way of business, the Frenchwoman was pretty well acquainted with the signatures of many noblemen and rich gentlemen who used to pay their wives' bills by means of cheques; and perhaps she might have had some of their letters by her. However, let that be as it may, she and this Shadbolt tried to make up a good purse before bolting off together

to France or America, or heaven knows where. So they manufactured three or four cheques; they got the money for a couple—they were found out when presenting the third—and now they've been committed for trial."

"And that will be transportation for life," observed Bab Smedley.

"Just so," replied the turnkey, as he unlocked the gate at the end of the passage to let himself out.

"Well, for my part," rejoined Bab, "I'd sooner cut one caper and have done with it off-hand."

The turnkey flung a look of pity upon the hardened woman: but he perceived that her attempt to smile was a hideously sickly one—and he knew therefore that though she pretended she would rather suffer death than be doomed to transportation for life, yet that in her own heart she envied the comparatively happy position of Madame Angelique. We may here remind the reader that the Frenchwoman had lost the greater portion of the ill-gotten gains of her former mode of life, by having been compelled to assign them to charitable institutions according to the decree which Queen Indora had pronounced from the judgment seat in the memorable tribunal at Oaklands. In a fit of desperation Madame Angelique had subsequently thrown herself entirely into the hands of the unprincipled scoundrel Shadbolt; and the reader has now seen the result of this fatal intimacy. The idea which had so often haunted her—namely, that of finding herself in a criminal prison—was now realized; and she knew that her doom would be transportation. Much altered was she during the last few months. She had lost her *embonpoint:* she had grown comparatively thin: her looks were haggard—her cheeks all the more so through the absence of the rouge that was wont to colour them: her eyes were sunken and hollow: some of her false teeth were gone. As for the state of her mind, it was more horrible than we can possibly describe: for she had but a very vague idea of what transportation actually meant—and through this very ignorance she was all the more terrified, as in imagination she realized it. She pictured to herself gangs of felons, female as well as male, working together in chains—in the midst of swamps swarming with reptiles, or of forests rendered hideous by the howling of wild beasts: she shuddered at the fearful long voyage across the seas: in short, the ex-milliner of a fashionable region of the West End was now as abject and miserable a wretch as any unfortunate vagrant whom she had ever turned away from her door.

When locked up in the gloomy cell—that cell which even in the middle of summer seemed to strike a cold horror deep down to her very vitals—she threw herself on the hard pallet, and gave way to her grief. She did not hear that there was a loud knock at the little trap in the huge massive door; and that knock was repeated several times before it aroused Madame Angelique from the woful condition into which she was plunged. At length she heard it; and starting up, she hastened to open the little trap. The woman whom she had seen in the passage, now met her view.

"Come," she said, "what's the use of your taking on like this? It won't mend matters, I suppose; and why can't you and I have a little companionable discourse?—as I daresay we sha'n't be very long allowed to be neighbours together."

"Who are you? and what have *you* done?" inquired Madame Angelique. "But tell me!" she added, with a shudder: "where is that woman who was condemned to death two days ago? I hope in the name of heaven she is not near us! I should dream of nothing but gibbets and scaffolds——"

"Don't be a fool!" interjected Bab Smedley, who could not prevent her countenance from assuming a ghastly look. "Should you like to see the woman?"

"No——yes!" replied Madame Angelique. "Yes, yes! I should like to see one who must be more miserable than myself: for there would be a consolation even in *that!*"

"Don't make so sure," rejoined Bab Smedley, "that the woman you speak of is so uncommonly miserable——"

"Not miserable!" cried Madame Angelique. "Good heavens——"

"Hush!—not so loud! We shall be overheard by those scamps of turnkeys; and they will pretty soon make us hold our tongues!"

"You at all events seem to take your lot carelessly enough," said Madame Angelique, now speaking in a low voice again; and it was with a species of envy that she contemplated this woman who to outward appearance was so indifferent to the fact of being the inmate of a gaol. "I suppose you are not going to remain here long?"

"No—not long," replied Barbara Smedley: but it now struck Madame Angelique that she had a strange look. "My time's up next Monday week."

"So soon?" ejaculated the ex-milliner: and she heaved a deep sigh of envy.

"Yes—so soon," rejoined Mrs. Smedley.

Madame Angelique's attention was now more than ever riveted upon the woman's countenance, over which their appeared to sweep a look of such wild intense horror that it seemed to indicate anything but a real callousness or indifference. A strange suspicion began to hover in the mind of the ex-milliner: for she recollected that the recently condemned murderess was to be executed on Monday week; and the coincidence of this woman's statement relative to the period of her own liberation, together with that look which had just swept over her features, engendered the idea that she herself might possibly be the doomed wretch.

"You wanted to see the woman who is to be hanged," said Barbara, affecting a laugh—but it was hollow, and died into a sepulchral gurgle in her throat; "and here she is!"

"You?" ejaculated Madame Angelique: for even now she could scarcely believe her ears.

"Yes—I!" responded Bab Smedley, exerting every effort to maintain an air of bravado. "And why not? I suppose I have had my day; and I may as well go next Monday week as live on. The turnkey told me you were safe to be transported; and I consider myself a happier woman than you. Why, sooner than I would be sent out of the country in a dreadful convict-ship, to endure all sorts of horrors, I would mount the scaffold cheerfully."

"No!" said Madame Angelique: "you are deceiving me—you have not the slightest advantage over me! I am happier than you! You know it—you feel it! It is a useless endeavour on your part to persuade yourself——"

"Don't tell me that!—don't dare speak to me in such a way!" cried Barbara Smedley; "or I will tear your eyes out:"—and her features became livid, not entirely with rage, but with the intense horror of her thoughts as she keenly felt the truth of all that the Frenchwoman had been just saying to her.

Madame Angelique was frightened at Barbara Smedley's appearance: she looked as if she were a tiger-cat about to fly at her; and the ex-milliner closed the little trap in the massive door.

Shortly afterwards the turnkey came to lock Bab Smedley up in her cell again; and the miserable woman felt a despondency was creeping over her,—a despondency which she could not possibly shake off—a depression which defied all her efforts to struggle against. She endeavoured to sing—to hum a tune—to force her lips to repeat aloud the declaration that she would sooner be executed on the scaffold than condemned to transportation: but all was of no avail. Misery of mind was growing upon her apace,—till at length she sat down upon the pallet in her cell, and gave way to her reflections.

But it was when night came, and she was in the utter darkness of this cell, that her thoughts grew the most harrowing. There she was, in the full vigour of life—in a few days to become a corpse! She would be placed in a coffin; and the horrible idea stole into her brain that when in that coffin she would have the suffocating sense of knowing that she was *there*. She could not fancy that this life which was now so vigorous, could so utterly pass away as to leave her inanimate as a marble statue—unsusceptible of whatsoever she was now enabled to feel, to know, or to think of. With such thoughts as these she writhed and tossed upon her bed: she pressed her hands to her brows to subdue the terrible activity of her brain; and then she strove to settle herself to sleep:—but hours passed ere slumber stole upon her eyes.

Ah! what was this?—why was the door opening? and who was now stealing in? Was it indeed the turnkey's voice that bade her speak low as he bent over her couch, and told her that he had come to save her? Could she possibly believe him? Oh, if there were a light that she might distinguish his countenance in order to discern whether he were mocking her or not! He bids her rise and hastily huddle on her clothes—but to be sure and not make the slightest noise, for fear lest an alarm should be raised and the proceedings should be discovered. Oh, how eager for freedom is she now!—but in the strong suspense, the wild hope, and the tremendous fear which she experiences, she trembles so that she can scarcely put on her apparel. At length it is done; and she follows the turnkey from the cell. She is in the passage:—even the air of that stone corridor, though 'tis still within the prison-walls, seems to inspire her lungs with the vivifying freshness of freedom's atmosphere. The turnkey unlocks the iron gate. Why is he thus befriending her? why is he risking everything on his own account to save her from the gallows? She knows not; and her thoughts grow confused as she tries to conjecture. But at all events he is sincere—and that is sufficient: for he is performing his promise—he is guiding her to freedom. They thread the stone passages: they walk on tiptoe—their garments rustle not—they proceed with the stealthiness of ghosts. Her kind friend, whose generosity is so unaccountable, possesses the key of every door that stands betwixt herself and freedom; and each is opened in its turn. How favourable are all circumstances!—no other official of the gaol appears—no one comes forward to offer the slightest molestation nor to bar their way; and thus the courtyard is reached. It is traversed——Ah! now they are at the great gates of the building. But what will the friendly turnkey do? how can he contrive to open them? But strange!—the porter does not come forth; and her generous guide has got the keys of these gates likewise. The wicket opens—she passes out—she turns to thank him—but he is gone. And now she forgets precisely what turning she takes to get away from the dreadful prison she has just left: but she finds herself groping along through lanes and alleys which get narrower and darker, and less practicable the further she proceeds. It is as if she were in a maze which becomes more and more bewildering the deeper she plunges into it. She is frightened: her liberty seems to be of no use to her: she has an appalling sense of progressing nearer and nearer to some terrific danger which will suddenly overwhelm her. And yet she must continue to flounder on through the intense darkness; for to turn back is to retrace her way to the prison whence she has escaped. All of a sudden a hand is laid upon her shoulder—myriads of lights spring up around her—the narrow alley through which she was groping her way swarms with constables—her name is vociferated——and she wakes, to find it all a dream!

Heaven alone could tell how long this dream had lasted: but whether it had endured for a space equivalent to that which the incidents themselves seemed to occupy, or whether all its elaborated details had actually been condensed into a far more limited compass in respect to time,—certain it is that the woman had been dragged through all the variations of the strong feelings, emotions, and sensations that could have veritably pertained to the progress of realities. So exhausting was the influence of all she had thus felt, and so overpowering was the crowning disappointment, that she lay for some time as if unable to move. The light of morning was glimmering in at the barred window; and the configuration of the vaulted cell, as well as the few objects that were in it, were discernible with sufficient clearness to convince her that she was really the inmate of a dungeon, and that it was no horrible hallucination which her fevered brain had conjured up. Yes—she was a condemned woman; and she was to perish on the gibbet!

Day after day now passed; and she saw no more of Madame Angelique: for the Frenchwoman was afraid of her, and would not open the trap-door when she knew that Barbara Smedley was taking exercise in the passage. The chaplain continued to visit her; but she still showed no contrition. She was very, very miserable—but not penitent. Her hardihood was breaking—but

not in the right sense. It was leaving her a prey to horror, to anguish, to the direst alarms—we might even say to an excruciation of mental agonies: but still it awakened not in her a true sense of the awful position in which she was placed.

Her time was drawing on: day after day was going by: one more day was past—the fatal one, as it approached, was assuming a hideous substantiality, like a spectral form emerging from a mist and taking colossal proportions. Still there was no penitence. Of wretchedness and woe, of deepest depression and profoundest despondency—of all these was she the prey: but she had no true remorse. The Sunday came on which what is called "the condemned sermon" was to be preached; and the chaplain delivered a discourse which he hoped might touch her heart. She rocked herself to and fro in the condemned pew; and when the ceremony was over, she was so weak and faint that she had to lean on the arm of a turnkey to get back to her cell. Then the chaplain visited her: but he found her still impenetrable to the feelings with which he piously sought to imbue her. She had now a matron or nurse remaining altogether with her: for an apprehension was entertained that in her desponding condition she might attempt suicide. Oh, what a glorious illustration of the merciful nature of our law, which takes such zealous care of those whom it is about to hang!

The hours went by: and though she did nothing to beguile the time—opened no book, conversed not with the matron, nor on this day took exercise in the passage—yet did the minutes flit past as if on the wings of a hurricane: for the nearer her doom approached, the more quickly went the time. Just when she would have had it drag itself along as if with leaden feet, it flew past her with the speed of a race-horse!

It was not until a late hour that she put off her apparel and lay down on her pallet. She had sat up and kept awake as long as she could, in order that she should not be cheated by slumber of the time that yet remained for her to live. So exhausted was she by the harrowing emotions that raged within her, that sleep almost immediately visited her eyes; and thus she slept for some hours,—a dreamless sleep so far as she understood it—but yet a feverish one, as the vigilant matron perceived that it was.

But, Ah! what ominous sounds are those which now break upon the ears of the condemned woman? A candle is burning dimly in the cell; and she starts up in affright. She listens: there is a hammering—a knocking: carpenters are at work. She comprehends what it is: the scaffold is being erected on the roof of the gaol! Each blow of the hammer seems to strike upon her very brain: every fresh sound appears to touch a chord thrilling with horrible coldness to her very heart's core. The matron endeavours to direct her attention to the more serious duty of preparing to receive the chaplain; for it is now past five o'clock in the morning, and the reverend gentleman is expected. But the condemned woman hears her not: all her thoughts seem to be riveted in an appalled manner upon those sounds that reverberate so dull, so heavy, and with such ominous reiteration through the cell.

The chaplain made his appearance: but on finding that the prisoner was still in bed, he retired for a short time, while she rose and apparelled herself. This she did mechanically, at the suggestion of the matron; and then the chaplain returned. She listened to him with eyes expressive of a dreamy vacancy: she appeared not to comprehend what he was saying, but only to be conscious of the droning sound of a human voice in her ears. Thus nearly two hours passed; and then the matron, who had retired for a time, brought in the condemned woman's breakfast. She ate and drank all that was set before her: but everything she now did, seemed to be marked by the listless apathy of an idiot.

At length an incident occurred which startled her into a vividly frightful sense of her appalling position. The door opened: the Governor and the Under-Sheriff entered the cell: but there was some one behind them—a man who lingered on the threshold. This was the executioner. Bab Smedley started up to her feet, her countenance convulsed with horror; and then she suddenly abandoned herself to the wildest and most passionate lamentations. When her anguish had somewhat subsided, and she had resumed her seat, the chaplain thought it a fitting opportunity to renew his well-meant ministrations: but the wretched woman listened not to him—she sat rocking herself to and fro, moaning piteously. The executioner approached: she rushed to a corner of the cell—she wildly bade him keep off, if he valued his life. Remonstrances were vain; and force had to be used in order to keep her still, while the executioner pinioned her arms in the usual manner.

Then she felt herself to be utterly powerless; and death already seemed staring her in the face. A sudden revulsion of feeling took place within her; and she implored the chaplain to speak words of consolation. He did his duty, according to the manner in which he understood it, by assuring her that there was a possibility of pardon for one who expressed and felt contrition even on the very verge of the grave; and the miserable woman now clutched eagerly at the promise. The procession was formed: it issued from the cell—and the ascent to the roof of the prison was commenced.

The top of the gaol was reached; and then, as the condemned woman flung her looks around, what a living ocean was spread before her eyes!—what countless multitudes were gathered about the place!—and all to see a fellow-creature die! She was closely attended by the chaplain; and until the instant when that mass of upturned human faces met her view, she had appeared to be listening to the words which were flowing from his lips. But now she suddenly stopped short: she gasped for breath: she would have fallen had not the Governor and the Under-Sheriff been ready to sustain her. Until her appearance upon the roof of the gaol, there had been conversation amidst the crowd—laughing, jesting, practical joking, and all those indecencies of behaviour which are characteristic of such a scene in England. But when that doomed woman emerged upon the summit of the gaol, a dead silence fell upon the multitude: it seemed as if the myriads of Babel itself had been suddenly stricken dumb. The voice of the chaplain was clearly audible to a considerable distance; and the prison-bell was tolling the knell of her who was about to die.

Yes—the burial-service was being said, and the knell was being tolled, for one who was yet alive—one who, if pardon were at that instant accorded, might yet live on for many a long, long year!—for one who had no mortal sickness that had brought her to the verge of the grave, but who physically was hale, hearty, and strong, with all life's principles potent and unimpaired within her, and who in respect to age was only in her prime! Yet was she already treated as one who belonged no more to this world—one who was already dead—an animated corpse, proceeding by some strange mechanism towards the gibbet, where for one whole hour by the clock she was to be ignominiously suspended. And thus for *her* the service for the dead was being recited—the solemn knell was being tolled!

And amidst that multitude of myriads congregated in the neighbourhood of the gaol—pressing hard up against the barricades—densely packed in every street, court, and alley whence a glimpse could be obtained of death's hideous paraphernalia—covering the house-tops—even mounted upon the very chimneys themselves;—amidst this mighty assemblage, we say, there were beings of her own sex—females who had come to witness her execution, just in the same way that they would flock to a pageant or a fair—to witness the Sovereign open Parliament, to feast their eyes upon the Lord Mayor's Show, or to treat themselves with a trip to Greenwich on Whit-Monday. Oh!—and what was more hideous still, many of those women had children in their arms. Frightful inoculation from the foulness of the gallows for that youthful offspring!—terrible infection for the juvenile progeny, from that enormous and loathsome plague-spot upon the civilization of this country!

The wretched woman ascended the few steps leading to the platform of the gibbet—the Chaplain on one side, the Under-Sheriff on the other—the executioner immediately behind—the Governor and some other officials of the prison a little way in the rear. O heaven! what a haggard, ghastly look—how full of deep ineffable horror that glance, which the doomed woman threw upward to the black ominous cross-beam and the chain with the hook that was dangling there to receive the noose of the halter which was already tied around her neck! She could no longer sustain herself by her own voluntary power: she was supported by those who attended on her last moments. The executioner—one of the expertest professors of the diabolical art of strangulation as applied to his fellow-creatures—a man who had most successfully graduated in this science, and whose experiences were associated with the tragic ends of all the great criminals who for the past dozen or twenty years had suffered death by the law's vengeance in this country,—the executioner, we say, was not long at his fearful work. He placed the woman on the very centre of the drop: in a moment the halter was attached to the chain: in the twinkling of an eye the knot was so accurately turned under the left ear that it should press upon a vital part; and then the sinister form of the executioner disappeared as suddenly as if he had melted into thin air. He had this faculty of gliding ghost-like away from the platform the very moment his horrible preliminaries were accomplished: but it was only to penetrate beneath that platform, to do all the rest!

The finger of the executioner drew back the bolt which sustained the drop: it fell—and the doomed woman, after struggling fearfully for a few minutes, ceased to exist. For one hour, by the clock—as appointed by the Sheriffs—did the body hang: for that whole hour did the gathered multitudes remain to gaze upon it;—and then once more did the executioner make his appearance upon the platform. This time it was to cut down the corpse, and lower it into the coffin which had been placed beneath the drop to receive it. Then workmen speedily came to remove the gibbet: the crowd melted away—the pickpockets glided off with their booty—and for the remainder of that fatal Monday all the public-houses in the neighbourhood did an excellent business. Doubtless some of the publicans thought of the old adage—"that it is an ill wind which blows nobody any good:"—and perhaps, if the truth were known, many of them would not have been very much displeased to have a hanging in the neighbourhood every Monday morning.

CONCLUSION.

BEFORE laying down the pen in respect to the present narrative, it only remains for us to record a few last particulars concerning some of the most prominent characters who have figured upon the stage of our story.

The young Duke of Marchmont led the lovely Isabella Vincent to the altar; and a happy day was it which united this youthful pair whose attachment had been marked by so much constancy and devotion. There has been but a lapse of few years since the solemnization of this bridal: but judging from the felicity which the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont have hitherto experienced in their married state, it is only just and reasonable to argue that this same sunshine of bliss will endure until the end. There is so much congeniality in their dispositions—each possesses a heart so susceptible of the warmest and sincerest affections—both are so imbued with virtuous principles and with the purest thoughts—that it were impossible for their union to be otherwise than a happy one.

Lady Christina Vivian did not mistake the nature of her own feelings, nor miscalculate the strength of her mind, when she assured her brother at Oaklands that she had completely triumphed over the hallucination which for a time had possessed her in respect to Lord Octavian Meredith. She accepted the suit of the high-minded, the handsome, and the well-principled Robert Stanley; and in due time she accompanied him to the altar. By the recent death of his father, he has inherited the Peerage of Vandeleur; and thus all that rank, riches, and the heart's affection can possibly combine together in order to achieve the happiness of mortals, belongs to the lot of Lord and Lady Christina Vandeleur.

It is with equal pleasure that we have to report favourably of the matrimonial career of Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith since they were re-united in France. Octavian himself recovered, as Christina had done, from an hallucination which threat-

ened to mar all his happiness; and if he thinks of the past, it is only that he may make all the more complete atonement to the amiable Zoe for the present and for the future. And, Oh! is not Zoe herself happy? Yes!—and all the more so, because this glorious sunlight of bliss was for a period so little foreseen,—at that period, we mean, when self-exiled from her home, she dwelt in the Old Chateau in the South of France. Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith returned to England shortly after the marriage of Christina; and what a happy day was that on which the two amiable friends were again locked in each other's arms. No syllable relative to the past was spoken: and yet there were looks exchanged which conveyed assurances of mutual happiness as well as pledges of imperishable amity.

An affectionate correspondence is maintained between Christian and Christina in England, and the King and Queen of Inderabad in that far-off oriental clime: and the vessels which plough the seas between the British ports and Calcutta, frequently bear choice gifts from one side to the other,—those reciprocal testimonials of a permanent and affectionate friendship! And while in England they hear of how the kingdom of Inderabad has indeed become the model State of Hindostan, the rulers of that kingdom on the other hand read from time to time, with ineffable delight, in the London newspapers which are forwarded to them, of how the Duke of Marchmont and Lord Vandeleur, Christina's husband, are distinguishing themselves in the British Senate, and how their voices are invariably raised in favour of liberty, justice, and human rights.

Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley are as happy in their marriage-state as those fond couples of which we have been speaking; and the sincerest friendship subsists between them, the Marchmonts, the Vandeleurs, and the Mereditths. The happiness of Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley experienced however a passing shade, thrown by the tragic fate of Mrs. Oxenden: for steeped in iniquities though she were, Laura could not forget that she was her sister.

The reader will not have forgotten the solemn lesson delivered to Mrs. Oxenden by Queen Indora on the occasion of that memorable scene at Oaklands, when her Majesty sat upon the dread tribunal. But, as we intimated at the time, Indora's words, impressive though they were, could produce no effect upon a heart so hardened as that of Mrs. Oxenden. When liberated from Oaklands, this selfish, worldly-minded, unprincipled woman hastened back to London, and endeavoured to find her late paramour Alexis Oliver. But she soon discovered that the intimation she had received from the Queen at Oaklands was substantially correct—and that this young man, having felt the degradation of the position in which he was living upon the gold of an abandoned female, had sought, under the auspices of his forgiving family's countenance and interest, the means for carving out an honourable career for himself. Mrs. Oxenden subsequently succeeded in captivating a foreign Ambassador, who placed her in a sumptuous mansion and surrounded her with all luxuries. Her extravagances knew no bounds: but her infatuated protector, being immensely rich, ministered to them without a murmur. Whose equipage was more splendid than that of Mrs. Oxenden?—what lady-equestrian displayed more beautiful steeds in the places of public resort than the mistress of the foreign Ambassador? But one day there was alarm and consternation in Hyde Park,—pedestrians running along frantically, with the expectation of beholding some frightful tragedy—equipages moving as quickly as possible out of the way of a steed which was galloping like the whirlwind, and over which the lady-rider appeared to have lost all control. For a while, however, she retained her seat in a manner which proved that though the animal itself was no longer under her restraint, her self-possession was not lost. Thus, for upwards of ten minutes was she borne along with the speed of the hurricane,—until a gate was reached. The animal rushed through it: and by the abruptness of the turn which it thus made, Mrs. Oxenden was thrown off. With terrific violence was she dashed against the masonry of that gate; and those who sped to raise her up, believed that she was dead. But no: the spark of life was not extinct; and she was borne to her splendid mansion,—there to linger on the verge of the grave for a period of many weeks. At length she recovered. Yes—her health was restored; but her beauty was gone Monstrous ugliness had stamped the countenance which so lately had the power to dazzle, to fascinate, and beguile. Her teeth had been knocked out—her nose was beaten flat—an eye was lost—her forehead and one of her cheeks were horribly scarred. Where was the foreign Ambassador? He had abandoned her. She was surrounded by wealth; and she might still live comfortably, in a pecuniary sense, for the remainder of her existence: but with the loss of her beauty the world's attractions were lost likewise. The terrific disfigurement produced by the accident, filled her with loathing for life. One morning, when her maid entered the chamber, Mrs. Oxenden was found hanging to the bed-post.

The Hon. Wilson Stanhope profited to some little extent by his former painful experiences in the ways of iniquity: the spectacle at Oaklands, and the counsel addressed to him by Queen Indora on that memorable occasion, were not altogether lost upon him. He wrote penitent letters to some influential connexions whom he possessed; and through their medium he obtained a clerkship in one of the Government departments. He abstained from actual crime: he shuddered at the idea of ever again placing himself within reach of the criminal laws: but he could not restrain his habits of extravagance. Debts accumulated, until at length he was arrested and conveyed to the Queen's Bench. Thence he procured his liberation by passing through the Insolvents' Court,—a process for which he forfeited his clerkship. His friends as a last resource procured for him a commission in the Anglo-Turkish Contingent, when that body was raised shortly after the breaking out of the war; and it is to be hoped that the Hon. Wilson Stanhope may in his new position profit more completely than he had previously done by the experiences of his earlier years.

It was gratifying to the King of Inderabad to learn, in the course of time, that his goodness and generosity towards Eveleen O'Brien and Lettice Rodney had not been thrown away. Both of these

young women became completely penitent for the past. The former, restored to her family in Ireland, married a young tradesman in good circumstances, but whom she did not deceive in respect to her antecedents. Lettice Rodney, after having for some time dwelt with a humble but respectable family, was wooed by a substantial farmer in the neighbourhood. She likewise dealt candidly with her suitor: but he was enamoured of her—he vowed that he would never allude reproachfully to the past—and she became his wife. We believe that neither the tradesman in Ireland nor the farmer in England have had any reason to repent the marriages which they thus contracted.

Mr. Shadbolt and Madame Angelique were duly tried for the forgeries of which they had been guilty, and were condemned to transportation. Vain was it that the male prisoner proclaimed himself to be of so excellent a character that he was invariably known amongst his acquaintances as "honest Ike Shadbolt:"—vain likewise was it that Madame Angelique went into hysterics and besought the tribunal to have mercy upon a poor friendless Frenchwoman. The evidence was conclusive against them; and they were shipped off to the penal colonies.

We should not omit to state that the Viscount and Viscountess Delorme have occasionally visited England to pass a few weeks with their friends Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith; and that they enjoy the completest happiness. M. Volney died at Madrid, about a year after his daughter's marriage: but Zoe has ever religiously respected the tremendous secret which he revealed to her with regard to the Alpine tragedy.

Mr. Armytage faithfully followed the counsel given to him by Mr. Coleman and Queen Indora to abstain from future speculations. He did not however long survive the tremendous incidents at Oaklands: he died suddenly, of a disease of the heart; and neither his daughter nor his son-in-law had ever the slightest reason to suspect that he had been for so many years acquainted with the fearful guilt of the late Duke of Marchmont—indeed from the very night of its perpetration, as recorded in the earliest chapters of our history.

Jane Barclay—no longer "Crazy Jane," but a rational, sane, and happy woman—presides as housekeeper over the domestic affairs of the mansion in Belgrave Square. It was at her own request that Christian gave her this post; for it would have better suited his inclinations and those of his amiable sister Christina, to have placed in an independent and affluent position the faithful creature whose devotion to the memory of her former mistress had been for a long series of years attended with such melancholy influences for herself. But Jane Barclay desired to dwell beneath the same roof with the son of the deceased Duchess Eliza;—and we need hardly assure the reader that she continues to be the object of the most friendly feelings on the part of the twins whom she so dearly loves.

END OF THE FOURTH SERIES

POSTSCRIPT.

THE "MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON" are now brought to a conclusion.

Every week, without a single intermission during a period of eight years, has a Number under this title been issued to the public. Its precursor, "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," ranged over a period of four years. For *twelve* years, therefore, have I hebdomadally issued to the world a fragmentary portion of that which, as one vast whole, may be termed an Encyclopedia of Tales. This Encyclopedia consists of twelve volumes, comprising six hundred and twenty-four weekly Numbers. Each Number has occupied me upon an average seven hours in the composition; and therefore no less an amount than four thousand three hundred and sixty-eight hours have been bestowed upon this Encyclopedia of Tales, comprising the four volumes of "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," and the eight volumes of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON." Yet if that amount of hours be reduced to days, it will be found that only a hundred and eighty-two complete days have been absorbed in those publications which have ranged with weekly regularity over a period of twelve years! This circumstance will account to the public for the facility with which I have been enabled to write so many other works during the same period, and yet to allow myself ample leisure for recreation and for healthful exercise.

In respect to the Third and Fourth Series of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON," it may be alleged by some that the title is to a certain degree a misnomer, inasmuch as the incidents which they contain bear slightly any reference to the British Court. But a Royal Court, in the proper acceptance of the term, is limited not to the circle of the Sovereign alone: it includes the aristocracy—the satellites revolving about the central sun. In this sense, therefore, it will be seen that there is no actual misnomer in the titles of the Third and Fourth Series of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON;" but that they constitute fitting pendants and sequences to the First and Second Series.

GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS.

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